

Reflections of a Feminist Porn Star

Nina Hartley

My Name is Nina Hartley. When this is published, I will be 32 years old and will have spent the last nine years as an active member of the sexual entertainment community, specifically the worlds of erotic dancing and explicit video. I am also a graduate nurse (BSN, magna cum laude, San Francisco State, class of '85), a secular Jew, a third-generation feminist, a happy bisexual, a member of a long-standing two-women-one-man triad of over ten years duration, and I do not happen to be a survivor of abuse, drug addiction or incest. I consciously chose, as a path to self knowledge, the exploration of sexuality in its many forms.

As someone who was raised to be distrustful of male sexuality (Ivory-tower Berkeley in the '60's and '70's), I indulged my exhibitionism (an o.k. feeling, according to the sex books of that time) and used erotic dancing and, later, explicit videos to demystify men's sexual nature and come to terms with my own. Sex work gave me an arena in which to work through my fear of men and their sexuality and I have not been disappointed in the path I have taken.

I see the sex drive as a natural, healing and empowering force of nature. Being able to revel in the sheer joy of sex has developed my capacity for compassion and caring and my joy touches many others who are struggling to make sex a more comfortable part of their lives.

I believe "feminist" is a self-applied label, and I am angered that a few women, granted lots of coverage by the press because of their extreme views, are being touted as the only voice of feminism. I reject the notion that there is some secret feminist orthodoxy, some single standard of measuring who is a "real" feminist. If feminism is about the promotion of equality between women and men, then I am one. If feminism is about the right of women to follow the paths of their lives with minimum outside interference, then I am one and proud of it. If feminism is about male-bashing or the fetishization of the concept of woman-as-eternal-victim, then I am not a feminist.

As someone who is aware of the complex nature of male/female sexuality in this culture, I resent it when those arguing against certain forms of sexual free expression do not begin by being clear about their sexual biases. So, in the spirit of honest disclosure, here are some of my most basic beliefs about porn imagery. I do not feel that the mere depiction of naked women is inherently degrading. Nor do I feel that depictions of women desiring sex is a negative thing. If one has been keeping up with the literature of the past 20 years on female sexuality, one would know that many women frequently desire a wide variety of sexual experiences, and know that women can, and do, use the pornographic medium to lay



*Nina Hartley, busted in January 1993, at Consumer Electronic Show
with 10 other porn actresses and Bill Margold
This story, still unfolding, will appear in our next issue.*

claim to their sexuality and they need our support.

I believe that, for people not predisposed to sociopathic fixations, no amount of exposure to "harmful" imagery will goad them to violent behavior. One should keep in mind just how many people have used passages from the Bible as justification for rape and murder. Blaming all of the sexual violence in our culture on the availability of sexually explicit words or images (no matter how distasteful) is illogical, irrational, ahistorical, puritanical, prudish, ignorant and just plain mean-spirited, no matter how well-intentioned the purveyors of such attitudes may be. It is to the culture's disadvantage that I hear no discussion of women as perpetrators of sexual violence nor acknowledgement of men's very real sexual pain and exploitation. We must deal with the real and women's sexual pain and rage as only part of a bigger picture.

Here in the '90's, there is a necessary split among feminists around the issues of sexuality and censorship and I'm in the middle of it. I know that, to a lot of people, the term "feminist sex worker" is an oxymoron; but not for me. I admit I'm unusual, the product of a unique life. But, that life gives me a different perspective on the issue of sex and feminism — this feminist speaks from direct experience. I've found a wide array of equally maverick, avant-garde women who have all come to remarkably similar conclusions concerning sexuality and the most recent push to "protect" women from its perceived dangers.

Sex as a commercial venture doesn't bother me because I do not automatically view all women as victims of sex; nor do I view all men automatically to be victimizers, or all intercourse as *de facto* rape (a Dworkin/MacKinnon tenet). Under

capitalism, all things can be commodified; why should sex be any different? It may not be the best way to deal with sex, but it shouldn't shock us that it occurs. Humans are first and foremost visual creatures. What really matters is time, place, degree, mutuality and consent. I believe that a woman is capable of consent. If we aren't granted that one prerogative then we are not being granted full adult status. Either women are capable of managing their sexual lives or they are not. Many of my opponents hold a bleaker view of sexual matters and this forever separates us.

Sex-as-a-weapon or a tool of terror and aggression were both invented by the ascending patriarchy as a means of social control. Sex-neg anti-porners say that "porn is the theory; rape is the practice". For me, it rings truer to say "patriarchal sexual repression is the theory, rape by men and denial of sexual pleasure (to self and others) by women is the practice." Dworkin and MacKinnon have blinders on when they make pronouncements on sex and pornography. They ignore that, in pre-patriarchal/pre-written history, women held dominion over Eros, and sexuality existed in forms that we would not recognize today nor could hardly comprehend. They refuse to see that Eros is malleable.

In the end, I feel it comes down to whether or not one feels that arousal and titillation are EVER desirable states to promote or achieve. To overlook the root causes of institutionalized violence (5000 years of anti-pleasure, hierarchical, patriarchal social engineering) in favor of placing the blame for Western society's ills on an entertainment form widely available for less than 100 years exposes an extreme bias. Women alone are not the victims of the system. Rather, women, children and the majority of men are op-

pressed by our pleasure-negative, puritanical society which deliberately denies both genders full access to their own bodies. What the Dworkinites don't appear to take into account is that hard-core has been legal in this country for only a generation. Porn entered the mass media (albeit much of the time in an underground form) less than 150 years ago; before that time it was the exclusive domain of the aristocracy. Since we know that the social phenomena of rape and the sexual abuse of women has been with us for far longer, it would appear that our current problems have a more complex etiology than the sex-negs care to admit.

As an educated, middle-class white female, I'm aware that I have

had options in my life that are not available to many women in the various branches of the sex industry. The concept of "choice" depends a lot on one's class background and many sex workers (as with workers in all fields) might desire to make their living in other ways if there were real options available. If the sex-negs were truly coming from a standpoint of sisterly support for all women, they would strive to remove the stigma from sex work making it easier for those who wish to leave a sex-related job to do just that. They would not treat sex workers with thinly-veiled contempt, or puritanical judgmentality and they would accept, like it or not, that there are a lot of sex workers of all classes who love their chosen profession.

When the sex-negs go on and on about the "horrors" of sex work, I cannot help but hear a clear chord of class bias (flavored liberally with a projection of their own worst fears). I speak from experience. I had to confront my own, unconscious, classist attitudes when I first started stripping in San Francisco in '83. I was around women who smoked, drank, partied, did drugs, picked partners who were wrong for them, wore "the wrong" clothes and no seatbelts, and did other things I didn't even know I had value judgments about until I was confronted with them. After working at the strip club for a few months, it became clear that these women had a lot more on the ball than I did when it came to sheer survival skills and it really opened my eyes to my own prejudice. Just as I demand the right to be let alone to pursue my personal goals, I had to learn to let go of my judgmentality toward other women.

At the National Organization for Women (NOW) national convention in Manhattan in June of '91, Phyllis Frank, the co-chair of the New York State and National Task Forces on Pornography, told us she had come to her conclusions about the "dangers" of pornography and sex work by talking only to those women who were self-identified victims/survivors of domestic or sexual abuse, and she professed amazement that she was talking to a contingent, over 12 women strong, of sex-positive feminist sex workers. Ms. Frank revealed she had formed most of her opinions about sex work by talking to women in battered women's shelters and to women who felt they had been harmed by their involvement in sex work. She had never spoken with any woman who had positive things to say about sex work, and hadn't thought such women existed or that they COULD exist.

In talking to reactionary femi-

nists, it becomes clear that they view me, and others of my ilk, as brainwashed, deluded, woefully misled or out-and-out lying about our experiences. Their blatant lack of respect for the voices and experiences of other women would be laughable if it were not so insulting. It is a betrayal of all the feminist principles I learned from my mother. Their refusal to consider that different women have different sexual realities, even when confronted with it in person, smacks of both arrogance and fear. How DARE these women tell me, to my FACE no less, that my experience was not my experience and, furthermore, could not ever BE my experience? The whole situation is Kafkaesque in the extreme. Here I am, a feminist, who, since the age of 13, has followed the early '70's dictum to "reclaim" and "define" my sexuality FOR MYSELF. Now, nearly 20 years later, they tell me I got it all wrong. These so-called pillars of the feminist establishment are no better than any patriarch who callously dismisses women's testimony about their own lives.

In their frenzy to see the subjugation and victimization of women in every sexual encounter, to profess that no woman's "yes" can ever mean just that, the modern pro-censorship feminist seeks nothing less than the complete re-infantilization of every woman. In their self-righteous indignation over the status of women (which in the West, is better now than at any time in recorded history), their own sexual self-loathing becomes glaringly obvious. These prudes are nothing less than lap dogs of the right wing, which has calculatingly employed them as willing pawns.

The sex-negs' rhetoric of man-as-lustful-animal vs. woman-as-pure-victim is Victorian sexual propaganda dressed up in modern language. It plays right into the hands of reaction-

ary religious fundamentalists. Can't these women see that nothing good can come from an alliance with a group of people who have, as their stated goal, nothing less than the re-criminalization of abortion (to say nothing about their stance on gay rights)? Can't they see that they are using (and being used by) a group that has as little respect for them as they, in turn, have for me and my comrades? It's like watching Jews kissing the feet of the Nazis.

I'm not saying that the sex industry, under the patriarchy and capitalism, doesn't have a lot wrong with it (mostly stupidity and mindlessness). All media are affected by the dominant culture's standards. But porn is a medium where, over time, the players have changed some of the rules and it will get better as we raise the consciousness of women, both as performers and consumers of adult material. When analyzing the explicit medium, keep in mind that it has been legal for only a little over 20 years and that women have been involved in its production (behind the camera) for less than 10 of those years. Women, as producers of porn, have yet to reach critical mass within

the industry. As with 98% of all business in the U.S., it is still dominated by men (good ones and bad ones) and we women have only begun to make our voices heard and our visions seen. Now is not the time for feminists to add to efforts to stifle our voices. Drive us underground and we have lost any chance at bettering working conditions for women and men in this arena and are condemned to greater exploitation and fewer rights. Bring porn and sex work into the light of day. Promote worker control of the means of production. Legitimize its existence. Acknowledge and encourage its potential as a social and sexual tool. Enforce existing laws on kidnapping, assault, battery and rape more assiduously. See the women who are sex workers as individual people, not some stereotype.

As many working women can attest, it is difficult to have honest, sisterly dialogue with the more rabid of the anti-porn crowd due to their extreme prejudice. This behavior is a slap in the face of essential feminist process as I understand it. In trying to discuss my truths with the Dworkin/MacKinnonites, I feel like

Alice pleading her case to the Red Queen. No logic I can use, no evidence I can gather seems to penetrate the intellectual closed-mindedness I confront. Honestly, it blows my mind to deal with some of these women. In my world of liberal security as the red-diapered youngest child of rad-lib parents, the idea that I might one day experience a priori prejudice from people I was raised to feel were sisters-in-arms never entered my mind.

When I entered this field of endeavor nine years ago, it was not only to explore my sexuality; I wanted to be an aware feminist voice from inside the business. I made myself available to anyone who wanted to talk about what I did and what it meant. I've done countless TV and print interviews, written numerous articles (both sexy and serious), and spoken to many college classes. I've faced a variety of people, some sympathetic, some not so happy at my existence. I've looked into the eyes of women who look back at me with hatred. I'm usually fairly calm during these exchanges since I am at ease with my subject and because my experiences with sex are some of my most cherished moments, not the source of deep pain. A common thread I see connecting my most vocal feminist opponents with each other is that they are operating from a base of rage (often justified but rage nevertheless). This is fine. Angry women can and have affected needed change. However, they must understand just how much time and energy is expended wastefully when one is continually angry and outraged. They must learn to practice self-awareness and acknowledge when their anger is justified and when it is

self-indulgent, when it is a positive force for growth and change and when it is overpowering one's ability to think clearly. If they are honest, the distinction will be self-evident.

Speaking as someone who has made peace with my sexuality and that of men in general, it boils down to this: how does one choose to deal with one's rage and what triggers it? I choose to feel it, acknowledge it, recognize its origins, own it and then incorporate it into my ever-evolving sense of Self. I choose to process my anger and go on with my life since I don't want to waste the only life I have.

We cannot — we must not — be drawn into limiting by law what consenting adults do in private. Don't worry about how other people enjoy themselves. Instead, turn some energy to providing support to those who ask for it. Take care of your own compost heap before feeling free to meddle in others'. Learn to relax a little; we're not going to change the problems of the world in our brief lifetimes. We need to pet a cat. Meditate. Work in our gardens. Take a walk. Get a massage. Give ourselves more orgasms and appreciate how far we've come in only thirty years. Let us see past our antagonisms, and create some common ground so that we may build a solid future for generations of feminists to build upon.

Nina Hartley is a veteran actress of the adult entertainment industry, and has starred in over 300 films. In a recent interview, she told CBS's 48 Hours "I'm gonna make movies 'til I don't look good naked!"