The Problem With Being Cool About Sex

Half a century after the sexual revolution, a new generation of feminists understands that we still haven't reconciled what we should want with what we do want.

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Tracy Clark-Flory's memoir, *Want Me*, is subtitled *A Sex Writer's Journey Into the Heart of Desire*, and it begins with an arresting anecdote: Two male porn actors on a set in Los Angeles are complaining to her about "girls these days." One actor is called Tommy Gunn, because where would pornography be without puns? The other uses his birth name, Charles Dera. Both agree that their love lives have suffered because too many women watch their films and demand a live-action replay, expecting to be choked, gagged, and slapped around. But who wants to take their work home with them? "It's, like, not even my cup of tea," Dera tells Clark-Flory, who covered the sex beat for *Salon* and is now a senior writer at *Jezebel*. "I want to go to dinner and have a fucking *nice meal* and take it from there. Where the *ladies* at anymore?"

The scene is irresistibly bathetic, in the vein of Tarantino hit men bitching about junk food, but it's also revealing. For many people under 40, the tropes of internet porn have saturated our lives and colored our expectations of sex. For "YouPorn natives"—the 20-somethings for whom abundant free porn has always existed, on smartphones as well as computers—the effect is even more extreme. Their first glimpse of sexual activity was probably not the descriptions in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the hippie illustrations in *The Joy of Sex*, or (as it was for Clark-Flory) the glamorous Jenna Jameson adult movies of the '90s, but the rough, dirty, extreme porn of the free internet. Some of them no doubt saw a digital gang bang before having their first real-life kiss.

Porn consumption is now such a fixture of modern life—there is no chance the American government will take your smut away—that space has opened up to question its effects without being dismissed as a wannabe censor. Which isn't to say that admitting to reservations about current sexual trends is easy. For Clark-Flory's 30-something generation (which is also my generation), being Cool About Sex is a mark of our impeccable social liberalism. If two or more adults consent to it, whatever it is, no one else is entitled to an opinion.

Yet here is the conundrum facing feminist writers: Our enlightened values—less stigma regarding unwed mothers, the acceptance of homosexuality, greater economic freedom for women, the availability of contraception, and the embrace of consent culture—haven't translated into anything like a paradise of guilt-free fun. The sexual double standard still exists, and girls who say no are still "frigid" while those who say yes are still "sluts." Some men still act with

entitlement, while others feel that, no matter what they do, they are inescapably positioned as the "bad guys" by the new sexual rules. Half a century after the sexual revolution and the start of second-wave feminism, why are the politics of sex still so messy, fraught, and contested?

Our language still lacks the words to describe the many varieties of bad sex that do not rise to the criminal standard of rape or assault.

Relitigating the sex wars of the 1970s and '80s is hardly where young feminists expected, or want, to be. In *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, Amia Srinivasan confesses her reluctance to cover second-wave criticisms of porn in the feminist-theory course she teaches at Oxford. She is Cool About Sex, after all, and assumed that her students would be bored by the question of whether porn oppresses women. She also assumed that the reputation of "anti-porn feminists," such as Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, had been fatally damaged by their alliance with the religious right to pass laws restricting access to pornography. What self-respecting member of Generation Z would want to line up alongside Jerry Falwell Sr. and Phyllis Schlafly, particularly when the other side is selling a fantasy of libertine pleasure?

Yet her class was "riveted," she observes in "Talking to My Students About Porn," the longest essay in her collection. Their enthusiasm was so great that it made her reconsider her own diffidence. The exchange is worth quoting at length:

> **Could it be that pornography doesn't merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said. Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to hear those protests? Yes, they said. Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalization of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said, yes to all of it.**
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> **It wasn't just the women students talking; the men were saying yes as well, in some cases even more emphatically … My male students complained about the routines they were expected to perform in sex; one of them asked whether it was too utopian to imagine sex was loving and mutual and not about domination and submission.**

Srinivasan's students echo the porn actors: poor old Tommy Gunn and friends, desperate to enjoy a romantic evening of pizza and small talk, and instead feeling obligated to try fisting. Having grown up with the all-you-can-eat buffet of internet porn, these young people pine for romance and intimacy—experiences that require the full and enthusiastic participation of another human being. That theme is taken up by another contemporary feminist author, Katherine Angel, in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*. The "rubric of consent," Angel writes, is not "sufficient for thinking about sex." We also need to consider the cultural scripts we have all absorbed, she argues—including the ubiquitous images of porn, the choreographed moves and expectations, the power relations. A narrow focus on consent assumes too much of us, because "we don't always know and can't always say what we want.

Clark-Flory also voices disappointment when she realizes how thoroughly the tropes of porn sex have wormed their way into her head. Even when she is fulfilling her greatest fantasy—real-life sex with her favorite porn star, whom she meets in a bar—she feels like a spectator of her own experiences, which clouds her ability to get lost in the moment. Susan Sontag once wrote that photography had become a way of "refusing experience"; porn has become a way of refusing intimacy. Its keenest consumers are so steeped in performative sex that they can't just look at their partner. The imaginary audience won't leave the bedroom.

The chasm between what we say and what we do has always made sex an irresistible topic. These books have been written in the shadow of #MeToo, and their authors dwell on the contradictions surfaced by that movement: Being available for sex is the mark of a liberated woman, but so is the ability to refuse it. Srinivasan observes that, for all our permissiveness, our language still lacks the words to describe the many varieties of bad sex that do not rise to the criminal standard of rape or assault. "A woman going on with a sex act she no longer wants to perform, knowing she can get up and walk away but knowing at the same time that this will make her a blue-balling tease, an object of male contempt: there is more going on here than mere ambivalence, unpleasantness and regret," she writes. "There is also a kind of coercion … the informal regulatory system of gendered sexual expectations."

Those expectations inflect a woman's "yes" as well as her "no." Like Clark-Flory, Angel begins her narrative with a vignette from the world of porn. A young woman—Girl X—arrives at the home of the porn actor James Deen to participate in "Do a Scene With James Deen," a reality-television-style stunt in which the porn actor solicits applications from his fans to have sex with him on camera. "It is mostly a long, flirtatious, fraught conversation, which circles repeatedly back to whether or not they are going to do this: have sex, film it, and put it online," Angel writes. The young woman's reluctance is only partly feigned. She is deciding, right then and there, if she wants to be seen naked on the internet, forever, an object of desire as well as derision. Some men will masturbate to her; others will despise her. Some will do both. In a sense, as Angel notes, the scene dramatizes "the double bind in which women exist: that saying no may be difficult, but so too is saying yes."

What's more, desire makes hypocrites of us all. Srinivasan reports that some of the feminists who watched the hard-core slideshows prepared by Women Against Pornography as part of its tours of Times Square in the 1970s were turned on, rather than repulsed, by the abhorrent filth they were there to condemn. Clark-Flory recounts taking refuge from the horror of her mother's terminal cancer in rough, degrading sex, uncomfortably aware that she was enacting everything those dried-up old second-wavers claimed was true about BDSM—that only people who hate themselves hurt themselves. In a similar vein, Srinivasan quotes the transgender theorist Andrea Long Chu, who has confessed that she transitioned in part to wear tight little Daisy Duke shorts and experience the "benevolent chauvinism" of being bought dinner. "Now you begin to see the problem with desire," Chu has written. "We rarely want the things we should."

But how much do culture and politics shape those wants? Porn-aggregator sites, to take one example, use algorithms, just like the rest of the internet. Pornhub pushes featured videos and

recommendations, optimized to build user loyalty and increase revenue, which carry the implicit message that this is what everyone else finds arousing—that this is the norm. Compare porn with polarized journalism, or even fast food: How can we untangle what people "really want" from what they are offered, over and over, and from what everyone else is being offered too? No one's sexual desires exist in a vacuum, immune to outside pressures driven by capitalism. (Call it the invisible hand job of the market.)

Little wonder, then, that these writers are all interested in how malleable sexual desire might be, and that they veer away from tidy prescriptions to fix "problematic" sex. Even as the cerebral Srinivasan subtly unpacks the public meaning of private acts, she sees "no laws to draft, no easy curriculums to roll out." In a raw, gonzo style, Clark-Flory asks how she can pursue "the right to be sexual" in a world where "women's desire is narrowed to being desired." Meanwhile, Angel borrows her ironic title from the great theorist of power Michel Foucault, joining him in mocking the idea that political liberation will usher in a world of angst-free sex. United by a refusal to offer sweeping answers, these writers are honest about the clash between our political pronouncements and our revealed preferences.

We are well used to the idea that today's sexual scripts aren't working for women, who feel under pressure to be as waxed and compliant as the MILFs of Pornhub. But what about men? "Surely we have to say something about the political formation of male desire," Srinivasan writes. In different ways, these books explore the idea that, while the traditional model of heterosexual-sex-as-domination might work for the alphas—the Silvio Berlusconis and Donald Trumps and Hugh Hefners (although even that is arguable)—it has caused widespread discontent among other men. Most people are not sociopathic slaves to their libido, and most men, when having sex with a woman, would like her to enjoy it too.

Yet sex involves physical and psychological exposure, which brings with it the possibility of rejection, or ridicule, or failure to perform. Masculinity is associated in our culture with strength and invulnerability, so if sex makes some men afraid, it shouldn't be surprising that they also struggle to recognize and deal with that fear, and that such emotions are sublimated into the tropes of pornography. "Heterosexual men get to work out, here, the aggression they feel towards their own weakness, towards their own vulnerability to desire," Angel writes.

And this may be why desire, a troubling symbol of the loss of control, gets refigured so insistently as triumph over the woman; as denigration of her; as humiliation of her. These are the ideals of mastery and power with which men punish women, but also themselves.

The most misogynistic porn is a displacement of anxiety into a fantasy of control: Guys who choke bitches don't secretly worry that they can't get it up.

That fantasy of control raises a question addressed by Srinivasan in the title essay of her book. Do we have a right to sex—a question implicitly understood to mean *Do men have a right to sex?* (Few women pay for sex, and even fewer carry out mass murders because they feel they are

denied it.) She discusses the case of Elliot Rodger, who went on a shooting spree in Isla Vista, California, in 2014. Rodger was a mixed-race nerd, and his violence was driven by his internet-fueled belief that he was, in the words of his manifesto, "cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me."

Srinivasan believes "that no one is obliged to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired," but she tries to feel empathy for Rodger, or at least for "the kind of diagnosis Rodger offered, in which racism and the norms of heteromasculinity placed him beyond desirability." She is right to observe that our beauty standards reflect other inequalities. The dating site OkCupid reported in 2014, for example, that Black women received far fewer matches than white women did from white, Asian, and Latino men, a disparity driven presumably by what Srinivasan calls "sexual racists."

Yet the difficulty of reconciling her two positions—sexual boundaries are sacrosanct at an individual level, but racist (or transphobic, or ableist) at a population level—is one of the reasons Srinivasan appends a 30-page "coda" to her 19-page original essay. At times, you sense her utopian yearning to dissolve these contradictions: If only good liberals found everybody equally attractive. "Must the transformation of desire be a disciplinary project (willfully altering our desires in line with our politics)—or can it be an emancipatory one (setting our desires free from politics)?" she asks. A more fundamental question might be: To what extent is that transformation even possible? Sexual desire has an evolutionary purpose; we don't know how susceptible it is to conscious rewiring.

All three writers focus largely on sex between men and women, because analyzing the power differences and historical baggage involved strikes them as important. And they write unashamedly from a female perspective: Aside from its biological and cultural meanings, *woman* now often stands in for "person who talks openly about sex." On social media, women cheerfully objectify the hot duke from *Bridgerton* and members of the Korean boy band BTS, while a man talking about female tennis players in similar terms would get pilloried as sexist. The Updike/Roth era is truly dead: We are primed to dismiss discussion of male desire as either locker-room vulgarity or pathetic neediness.

Yet sex is something we need to talk about honestly, and seriously, without shame or awkwardness, because it is tied up with fundamental questions about the relationship between the individual and society. What should another person, or society as a whole, tolerate to make us feel good? Can we shape our sexualities to match our politics, or are we condemned to perpetual hypocrisy once the bedroom door is closed? Is sex most usefully thought of as a physical need, like breathing; as a human right, like freedom of speech; as a spiritual connection that takes on full meaning only if it's part of a relationship; or even, as Clark-Flory describes her night with the porn star, as simply like "bungee jumping, an adrenalizing physical feat"? Can rules made by believers in one of these frameworks be applied to those operating under another?

No, tomorrow sex will not be good again. As long as some people have more money, options, and power than others do; as long as reproductive labor falls more heavily on one half of the population; as long as cruelty, shame, and guilt are part of the human experience; as long as other people remain mysterious to us—and as long as our own desires remain mysterious too—sex will not be good, not all the time. We will never simply want the things we should.

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Want Me: A Sex Writer's Journey Into the Heart of Desire
TRACY CLARK-FLORY, PENGUIN BOOKS

The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century
AMIA SRINIVASAN, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent
KATHERINE ANGEL, VERSO