Taboo Technologies: Sex Toys in America Since 1850

By

Hallie Lieberman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Mass Communication)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2014

Date of final oral examination: 6/30/2014

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Stephen Vaughn, Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication
William J. Reese, Professor, History
Greg Downey, Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication
James Baughman, Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication
Judith Houck, Associate Professor, History of Science

© Copyright by Hallie Lieberman
All Rights Reserved

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Sex Toys in America 1
What is a Sex Toy? 2
Why Sex Toys Should Be Studied 4
Literature Review 9
History of Sexuality 9
The Women's Movement 24
Consumption and Print Culture 25
History of Technology 29
Organization of Dissertation 34

Chapter Two - Curing "the sexual wrecks of humanity": Rubber Dildos in 19th Century Medicine 39
History of Rubber 43
Rubber Dilators 48
J. Marion Sims and Vaginismus 50
Vaginal Dilators Spread Through Medicine 58
Rectal Dilators 64
Conclusion 68

Chapter 3: The War on Immoral Rubber Goods: Anthony Comstock's Anti-Sex Toy Campaign 79
Why Vice Societies Disliked Sex Toys 85
History of The Comstock Act 88
The NYSSV and the Progressive Era 98
Conclusion 102

Chapter 4: Selling Sex-Toys During the Comstock Era 108
Sex-Toy Distribution 111
Advertising in the Nineteenth Century 113
"Dildoe" Disappears 117
Sex-Toy Ads in the Sporting Press 122
Sex-Toys Ads in the Mainstream Press 127
Comstock Heads to Akron 129
The Case of the Vacuum Erection Device 132
Conclusion 134

Chapter 5: The Vibrator Arrives 144
The Early History of the Vibrator 148
Masturbation Attitudes and Anthony Comstock 150
Selling Vibrators 152
The Vibrator as Household Appliance 157
Medical Appliance 162
Vibrator and Sexual Pleasure 172
Conclusion 173

Chapter 6: Vibrators and the Sexual Revolution 192
The Proto-Sexual Revolution (1940s-early 1960s) 196
Obscenity Laws 201

Betty Dodson Uses a Vibrator 205
Dell Williams and The Rise of the Feminist Sex-Toy Store 221
1973 National Organization of Women Sexuality Conference 223
Dodson Speaks Up 225

Chapter 7: The Vibrator Becomes Political: Feminist Sex-Toy Stores and the Place of Sex Toys in the Women's Movement 250
Dell Williams And Eve's Garden 251
Advertising Eve's Garden 253
Commodifying the Women's Movement 254
Developing a Brick-and-Mortar Store 260
The Dildo Debates 262
Silicone Dildos 265
Williams and Her Customers 271
Good Vibrations 272
Advertising Good Vibrations 279
Conclusion 284

Chapter 8: Sex Toys Head to Popular Culture 290
Vibrator Use in the 1970s 292
The Sex Toy in Underground Comics 295
Underground Newspapers and Magazines 300
Movies 301
Sex Toys in the 21st Century 306

Bibliography 335

Abstract

My dissertation examines the history of sex toys in America from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first century, focusing on the construction of their cultural meanings through mass media. Sex toys are technologies imbued with deep cultural taboos. Tracing their history and changing cultural status can reveal deep shifts in attitudes towards sexuality, technology, and consumption in America. Using archival sources, interviews, advertisements, and other depictions in the media, I examine how sex toys have, at various times throughout history, been represented in remarkably different ways, for example as medical tools that cured asthma and calmed babies, small appliances that helped the housewife relax, and as feminist symbols of women's liberation.

The history of sex toys does not follow a straight line from repression to liberation. In some ways, sex toys were more fully integrated into American culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than they are in the present. The first half of my dissertation (1870-1930) is structured around the history of two technological innovations, rubber vulcanization and electric power. These innovations made possible the rubber dildo and the electric vibrator. During this era, sex toys were sold under the guise of medical devices and small household appliances. These disguises allowed companies to advertise sex toys widely in mainstream media without violating social mores or anti-obscenity laws.

The second half of my dissertation (1969-2014) is structured around technologies in use. By the 1970s, changing sexual attitudes allowed sex toys to lose their disguises and be openly sold as sexual devices. Some feminists embraced vibrators as liberatory symbols, even creating female-owned stores that marketed sex toys to women. Yet greater openness about sex toys helped marginalize them within mainstream culture. Advertisements virtually disappeared from

mainstream publications and were instead relegated to fringe media such as underground newspapers. After the 1970s, sex toys gradually reentered mainstream popular culture in TV shows and films, yet they were usually portrayed negatively. Even today, most advertisements in mainstream media cannot even mention the sexual uses of sex toys.

Acknowledgments

Like any book-length work, this dissertation could not have been possible without the support of numerous people. First, I would like to thank Professor Steve Vaughn for being the best dissertation advisor ever and for urging me to investigate the Ralph Ginzburg Papers. These completely transformed the trajectory of my dissertation. Thanks also to my committee member Professor William Reese for his invaluable insights into the Progressive Movement, Professor Greg Downey for his expertise on the history of technology, Professor James Baughman for his knowledge of the history of media, and Professor Judy Houck for her helping me find sources on the second-wave feminist movement. Professor James Danky was also enormously helpful and pointed me towards underground comics which became a key theme in Chapter 8.

Betty Dodson, Dell Williams, Joani Blank, and Gosnell Duncan were gracious enough to let me interview them, and their first-hand accounts of the sex-toy industry in the 1970s and 1980s were extraordinarily useful. Metis Black of Tantus Silicone also shared her insights on the history of silicone sex toys and put me in contact with Gosnell Duncan. Dr. Debby Herbenick at Indiana University contributed her insights and research into current sex-toy use with me. Donna Drucker also provided helpful resources on sex machines.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Journalism and Mass Communication generously provided me with five years of support, including a dissertation-writing fellowship year. Their travel funding allowed me to attend conferences nationally and internationally. I also had assistance from The Graduate School, in the form of the Vilas Travel Grant Award, as well as the Holtz Center for Science and Technology Studies Grant, which helped fund my conference travel.

The Lemelson Center at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History awarded me a 10-week fellowship to explore the archives, where I discovered invaluable resources on the history of vibrators. Eric Hintz made me feel welcome at the Lemelson Center. The archivists at the NMAH Archives are some of the most knowledgeable, approachable, and generous archivists I have ever worked with. Franklin Robinson helped me find sex-toy sources from 1970s and beyond. Allison Oswald aided me in discovering hidden collections. Kay Peterson alerted me to the mini-Warshaw collection. Thanks also to the Bakken Museum of Electricity and Life for providing me with a travel grant that enabled me to research the history of the electrotherapeutic and vibrator industries. Elizabeth Ihrig is the best librarian ever (aside from my Mom).

A number of friends and family members assisted me with my dissertation. Allison Murray's expertise in popular culture was invaluable for my final chapter. Eric Schatzberg was the best boyfriend and mentor in the world. He has patiently read my writing and shaped my development as a scholar, while listening to me chatter endlessly about sex toys for the past two years. I could not have written my dissertation without the help of him or of Miss Yvonne, the best dog in the world, who took time out of her busy schedule to provide me with unflagging support in my years of writing this dissertation. I wish she had lived to see it till the end. My parents, Erik and Ann Lieberman, have also been amazingly understanding and supportive through this long process. I also am thankful for the inspiration of my grandfather, Hyman Lieberman, whose amateur cetacean research fueled my curiosity in the mysteries of life.

Finally I want to thank all the pioneers in the field of sex research who made this dissertation possible. Without them, a dissertation on sex toys would have never seen the light.

Chapter 1: Sex Toys in America

> "Well, my dears," said Laura, "you must know that when I read this book…I found at the end an advertisement for a dildoe."
> "Oh yes, I have heard of it," said Flora.
> "Well, I have, in fact, the advertisement in my purse. I will read it to you," and she read as follows:
> "The Dildoe, or Ladies Syringe. The grand desideratum accomplished by the Patentee is the substitution of India rubber for the shaft of this article…"
> - *The Story of a Dildoe, a Tale in Five Tableaux,* 1891[1]

In the 1891 English novel *The Story of a Dildo* Flora McPherson, spurred on by an advertisement in the back of an erotic book, sets out in New York City, the epicenter of the sex-toy trade in the late 19th century, to purchase a "dildoe or ladies syringe." In the 19th century, dildos had two identities: as medical devices and as sexual devices. They were advertised in disguise, sold in respectable newspapers as "ladies syringes," while in books and gentlemen's catalogs they were "dildoes." This fictional ad perfectly encapsulates the place of sex toys in American culture for the past 150 years. The dual identity of sex toys, as both sexual and non-sexual devices demonstrates Americans' conflicted views on sexuality.

Advertisements are just one of the many sources that reveal the story of sex toys in America from the mid 1800s through the 1970s. The history of the sex toy is intimately connected with four larger themes in American history: sexuality, technology, consumption, and law. The sex toy is an object that physically embodies all these contested themes.

In my dissertation, I argue that the history of sex toys does not follow a straight line from repression to liberation. In some ways, sex toys were more integrated into American culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than they are in the 21st. Sexual devices were commonly

[1] *The Story of a Dildoe, a Tale in Five Tableaux* (London: Privately Printed, 1891), 13-14.

advertised in mainstream magazines at the turn-of-the-century under the guise of medical devices and small household appliances, camouflages necessary to avoid obscenity prosecutions. These disguises allowed companies to advertise sex toys widely in mainstream media without violating social or legal codes. When the sexual revolution came along in the late 1960s and sex toys became openly sold as sexual devices, sex toys were stigmatized and marginalized within mainstream culture, and ads virtually disappeared from the mainstream media and were instead relegated to fringe media such as underground newspapers and magazines. After the 1970s, sex toys gradually reentered mainstream popular culture in TV shows and films, yet they were usually portrayed negatively. Even today, most advertisements in mainstream media cannot even mention the sexual uses of sex toys.

What is a Sex Toy?

Sex toy is a fairly recent term. It only came into regular use in the late 1990s. Since this time, it has been the dominant term used to describe sexual devices.[2] In my dissertation I use the terminology that manufacturers used to describe their devices in the era under discussion. However, when I talk about the category as a whole, I employ the contemporary *sex toy* or *sexual device* because no such umbrella term existed during most of the periods covered in my dissertation. The only similar term was the pejorative *immoral rubber goods*, which was a term used by vice inspectors that encompassed sexual devices such as dildos, artificial vaginas, and ticklers, as well as contraceptives like condoms, and pessaries. But no catch-all terms solely for sex toys existed in the 19th century. However, terms existed for individual devices, like dildos,

[2] Google NGram, "sex toy," 1900-2014, accessed on August 10, 2014.

which were called *dildoes* and *Old Maid's Friends.* By the mid-1970s, the term *marital aids* was used to describe all types of sex toys, but its use had declined by the 2000s.[3]

Defining *sex toy* is challenging because sex toys are culturally marginal products and many dictionaries, even slang dictionaries, do not define the term.[4] The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, does include this definition: " a device for sexual stimulation (as a dildo, vibrator, etc.) or to enhance sexual pleasure or performance."[5] Their definition seems to be the dominant one, as current sex-toy guides feature dildos, vibrators, and other items like anal toys, and handcuffs. Yet to be a sex toy, an object does not have to be a man-made device. Carrots and cucumbers have been employed as sex toys. Nor does it have to be a device designed or marketed for sexual uses, as sex-toy guides recommend repurposing chop-sticks as nipple clamps. In fact, in the early 2000s, a zine devoted to do-it-yourself sex toys existed, and it offered instructions on making vibrators out of Easter eggs and off-the-shelf eccentric motors.[6]

For the purposes of my dissertation, I am using the *O.E.D.*'s definition as a starting point to define the category of sex toys, but I am also incorporating contemporary ideas of what a sex toy is. I define a *sex toy* as a) any manmade device marketed in a sexual fashion for use on the genitals, buttocks, anus, or breasts, or b) any manmade or natural device or object (ie.

---

[3] Google NGram, "marital aids," 1900-2014, accessed on August 11, 2014.

[4] The following dictionaries do not contain the word "sex toy": *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v., "sex toy," accessed August 10, 2014, http:/www.m-w.com; *Dictionary of American Regional English*, s.v., "sex toy," accessed August 10, 2014, and *NTC's Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions,* s.v, "sex toy."

[5] This is the second definition, the first, a, is "a person viewed as a sexual plaything," *OED Online,* "sex toy," accessed August 10, 2014; Another dictionary defines "sex toy" as "an object or device used to provide or enhance sexual gratification," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 5th ed., s.v., "sex toy."
http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176989?redirectedFrom=sex+toy

[6] Emma Taylor and Lorelei Sharkey, *Em and Lo's Sex Toy: An A-Z Guide to Bedside Accessories* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006), 44; *Go Fuck Yourself*, rev. ed., circa 2000; see also, Matt Padgett, *Make Your Own Sex Toys* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).

showerhead or cucumber) used to produce sexual pleasure regardless of manufacturers' or inventors' stated intentions for the object.

Why Sex Toys Should Be Studied

Since prehistoric times, humans have been building tools to stimulate their genitals. The history of these tools has been virtually ignored by scholars.[7] Perhaps historians ignore this subject because they feel that it is marginal. But David Edgerton (1999) provides an even more convincing explanation. He argues that historians "attribute important effects to technologies which have had…high cultural visibility, for example, aviation and nuclear power. Conversely we under-represent technologies which have low cultural resonance or may be invisible, for example, contraceptive technologies."[8] Sex toys have even lower cultural resonance than contraceptives because they are designed solely for pleasure; they lack the utilitarian legitimacy of condoms or birth control pills.

Historians should determine a technology's importance based on the extent of its use, Edgerton says. Technologies that are in wide use frequently become invisible to the user and the culture, leading scholars to ignore such technologies as objects of study. Using that standard, sex toys have been important to humans for at least 150 years. They have been in existence for much longer than that, however. Archeologists have uncovered double phallic batons from the Upper Paleolithic Period. Wealthy ancient Egyptians were buried with artificial phalluses complete with

---

[7] Some of the most important works on the history of sexuality ignore sex toys. See, Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Estelle Freidman and John D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999). Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture* (New York: Bantam, 1996).

[8] David Edgerton, "From Innovation to Use: Ten Eclectic Theses on the Historiography of Technology," *History & Technology*. 16, no. 2 (1999), 122.

harnesses.[9] Dildos were common enough in ancient Greece that Herodus' comic plays sung the praises of dildos as being superior to penises, and even included a dildo cobbler as a character.[10]

It is not just a low cultural visibility that has caused the lack of historiography of sex toys; there are also more practical reasons.[11] First, there are a paucity of sources and no central repository where they hide. Second, there exists an assumption that the subject is not important enough to warrant a book-length study. Third, there is no well-defined body of scholarly literature on the history of sex toys.

It is true that sources are hard to find, and the existing sources are scattered in numerous archives around the country, hidden within databases, peering out in tiny newsprint. To tackle this challenge, I have taken a kamikaze approach and have sought sources everywhere. Patents, catalogs, comics, and newspapers are just a few of the sources used in my dissertation. As much as I hoped to find many of my sources digitally—and the library's databases of newspapers, advice literature, and underground comics were immensely useful—many of my sources are sequestered in archives. I found pre-1900s sex-toy catalogs in the trade literature collection of the American Antiquarian Society, early 1900s vibrator manuals at the Bakken Museum of Electricity and Life, and 1970s-era feminist sex-toy store newsletters at the Kinsey Institute. I examined hand-cranked vibrators from the first decade of the 20th century in London's Science Museum, vacuum erection device companies' arrest records at the National Archives, and

---

[9] Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture* (New York: Bantam, 1996), 121.

[10] Marilyn Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture,* 2nd Ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 244-245. Dildo jokes also showed up in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata,* Edward Kelly, "A New Image for the Naughty Dildo?" The Journal of Popular Culture 7, no. 4, (Spring 1974): 804-809.

[11] The only scholarly work on the history of sex toys is Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' The Vibrator and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Most other works that discuss their history in passing build upon Maines.

vibrator companies' promotional booklets from the 1940s at the Racine's Heritage Museum. At the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, I found trade literature from electric companies promoting vibrators, and at the Wisconsin Historical Society I uncovered the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice's campaign against the sex-toy industry that started in the 1870s.

The second reason for the lack of historical research into sex toys, that sex toys are a minor subject in the scheme of American history, seems to make sense on the outset. Other commodities appeared to have played a more important role in American history. Colonists did not start the Revolutionary War by casting their dildos into Boston harbor. But upon closer examination, sex toys can teach us a great deal about American culture when they are seen in a broader context. For example, the story of the 19th century dildo is intimately tied to technological innovation, in the form of the vulcanization of rubber. The history of the early 20th century vibrator was shaped by the transformation of newspapers from political media to commercially supported media. And social changes like the women's movement and radical feminism shaped the late-20th century vibrator.

The most influential and widely cited work on the history of sex toys is Rachel Maines' *The Technology of Orgasm* (1999). My dissertation is, in part, an argument against her work. Maines argues that 19th century physicians adopted vibrators as a technology to treat patients for hysteria, which they previously treated with genital massage, rubbing their patients' clitorises until they had orgasms. According to Maines, doctors did not think of their treatments as sexual because of their androcentric bias, which led them to believe that women only got pleasure from sexual intercourse. So when the vibrator was invented, doctors eagerly embraced it as a time-saving replacement for their tired hands that also allowed them to treat more patients. Maines

draws on this analysis to describe the vibrator as a "capital-labor substitution device" that retained a camouflage of non-sexuality because doctors did not use it penetratively. She argues that this medical cover helped popularize the vibrator as a medical device, thus concealing its sexual powers. But when vibrators began appearing in pornography in the late 1920s, they lost their "social camouflage as a home and professional medical instrument." Once the vibrator had been revealed as a sexual device, Maines concludes, doctors stopped using them in their practice and mainstream companies stopped marketing them.[12]

This research was pathbreaking when Maines began working on the topic in the 1980s, legitimizing research on a technology that had been ignored by earlier historians. However, Maines' account has significant problems, both in terms of historiography and evidence. Her argument presents the vibrator as a tool of sexual repression, a device invented by male doctors who saw women's sexuality as a medical problem. This account is rooted in an older feminist historiography of technology that grants little agency to women.[13] Despite these limitations, Maines' account of the vibrator now permeates popular culture, appearing in a Tony-nominated play, a feature film, a documentary, and a line of vibrators based on the film. Her account, in which men profited by controlling women's sexuality, clearly resonates with our culture.[14]

---

[12] Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 20, 108-110, 121-122.

[13] For a further critiques of Maines' argument, see Chapter 4 of my dissertation; Sarah W. Rodriguez, "Rethinking the history of female circumcision and clitoridectomy: American medicine and female sexuality in the late nineteenth century," *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* 63, no. 3 (2008): 323-47; JoAnn Wypijewski, "Playing Doctor," *The Nation,* June 18, 2012; Judy McGaw, McGaw, Judy. "No Passive Victims; No Separate Spheres: A Feminist Perspective on Technology's History," in *In Context: History and the History of Technology—Essays in Honor of Mel Kranzenberg*, edited by Stephen Cutliffe and Robert W. Post Bethleham, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1988.

[14] The documentary *Passion and Power* was released in 2007; In 2009 Sarah Ruhl's *In The Next Room, or the Vibrator Play* followed; a dramatized version of the book was turned into the movie *Hysteria* in 2011, and the company Jimmy Jane produced a line of vibrators that was a tie-

Rather than focusing on Maines, I present an alternative explanation for the success of the vibrator. Success is not simply a matter of sales, which certainly numbered in the millions, but in cultural presence, a presence largely created through advertising.[15] I argue that the vibrator succeeded because it was a dual-use technology, a sex toy that had non-sexual uses, treating conditions like backache, constipation, and sciatica. Vibrator manufactures followed the same strategy as contraceptive companies that escaped prosecution by successfully arguing that their devices had non-contraceptive medical uses.[16] The vibrator's non-sexual uses allowed legitimate companies to manufacture them, electric companies to promote them, and consumers to purchase them without embarrassment or legal restrictions. Therefore, the history of the vibrator does not follow a straight line from camouflage to openness. Vibrators were not fully camouflaged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as non-sexual devices. Nor did they emerge in the 1960s as fully sexual devices. They were always a part of the sexual culture.

The paucity of scholarly literature on the history of sex toys creates a challenge in framing the subject. Maines (1999) connected the 19th century vibrator to the history of technology, sexuality, and medicine. I add to this framing, asserting that sex-toy history is also a story of mass media, marketing and obscenity laws. Anjali Arondekar (2009) uses literary theory to portray the India-rubber dildo's appearance in pornography as a symbol of

---

in to the film in 2011. Emiko Omori and Wendy Slick, *Passion and Power*; Ruhl, *In The Next Room,* 2009; Wexler, *Hysteria,* 2011.

[15] See text to footnote **Error! Bookmark not defined.**.

[16] Ezra Heywood, *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood's Defense Before the United States Court in Boston, April 10, 11, and 12, 1883* (Princeton: Free Speech Press, 1883),17-19; Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 39.

colonialism.[17] In contrast, my framing of the story of the dildo centers on the history of innovation, technological developments, print culture, and the Progressive Era.

Literature Review

Because the history of sex toys has not been adequately theorized, this literature review attempts not merely to summarize scholarly writings in relevant disciplines, but also to define the field itself. My dissertation intersects with three main areas of historical scholarship: the history of sexuality, the history of consumption and mass media, and the history of technology. The history of sexuality is the most obvious field, but surprisingly it has tended to ignore the history of sexual objects used for pleasure. Because sex toys are mass consumer commodities that have been widely represented in the mass media since the mid-19th century, the history of consumption and mass media is central to my dissertation. The third field, the history of technology, might not seem central to the history of sex toys, unless one takes the view, which I do here, that sex toys are technology.

History of Sexuality

Since my dissertation is a study of sex toys (albeit devices that were not always referred to as such) the history of sexuality is highly relevant to my dissertation. The field of the history of sexuality traces changes in sexual desires, practices, and regulations over time. In this section, I will discuss the challenges of writing histories of sexuality, the dismantling of the repression-to-liberation hypothesis, and the historiography of sexual regulations. I also draw on the related field of the history of gender to discuss the historiography of women's movements during the 1960s and 1970s.

---

[17] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 102.

Studying the history of sexuality is challenging for a number of reasons. Scholars have to grapple with the taboo surrounding the open discussion of sexuality and the limited funding available for sex research. They are also faced with a prejudice that sex is not a serious topic for academic study. Finally, there is the difficulty in obtaining primary sources. It is because of the problem of finding sources that scholars have focused their attention on prescriptive literature like sex manuals and medical articles, as D'Emilio and Freedman (1990) have argued. They cite John and Robin Haller's *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (1974) as a prime example, a book that depends on advice literature and medical literature to make its arguments. Because the audience for prescriptive literature was middle- and upper class white men and women, studies of this literature are limited and ignore a majority of the population.[18] And prescriptive literature is problematic itself in that it does not say anything about what people actually did in the bedroom. Although D'Emilio and Freedman were writing about pre-1990 scholarship, scholars writing after this time have continued to rely on prescriptive literature, including Peter Laipson (1996) and Erin Connell and Alan Hunt (2006). Much of D'Emilio and Freedman's critique was probably shaped during their research for *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1988). In this classic work, they relied on a variety of sources including letters and diaries, popular culture, and sexological works.[19]

The history of sex toys has also been plagued by a similar focus on producers' stated intentions for the technology. This focus on taking producers' marketing claims literally has led

---

[18] Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio, "Problems Encountered in Writing the History of Sexuality: Sources, Theory and Interpretation," *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no. 4 (1990), 482; see also Lisa Duggan, "Review Essay From Instinct to Politics: Writing the History of Sexuality in the U.S.," *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no.1 (1990): 95-109.

[19] Peter Laipson, "Kiss without Shame, for She Desires It": Sexual Foreplay in American Marital Advice Literature, 1900-1925, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Spring, 1996), 507-525; Erin Connell and Alan Hunt, "Sexual ideology and sexual physiology in the discourses of sex advice literature," *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality,* vol. 15, no.1 (Spring 2006), 23-45.

historians to ignore the role that sexual pleasure has played in the popularity of sexual technologies. In part, this is a question of missing sources, as consumers of sexual devices rarely left records, so focusing on doctors and producers is practical. However, D'Emilio and Freedman believe that the main problem with most sex history "is not a lack of sources but rather a need to define more clearly the subject matter of sexuality and to be more sensitive to gender and class differences in historical experience."[20] Since *Intimate Matters* was published, scholars have done just that, according to Duggan (1995). She argues that sexual culture has not been solely shaped by the middle class, but influenced by all classes.[21] Scholars who have focused on working class sexuality include Elizabeth Clement (2006) in *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945.* However, other historians—such as Elizabeth Watkins, *On the Pill* (1998) and Carol Groneman, *Nymphomania* (2000)— have continued to focus on middle and upper-class sexuality because more sources for upper- and middle-classes exist.[22]

The belief in Victorian sexual repression underpinned many of the histories of sex before Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1978). These works included Stephen Marcus' *The Other Victorians* (1966), which focuses on English sexuality; Ronald Pearsall's *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (1969); and Ronald Walters' *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America* (1974).[23] Foucault argues that the repressive hypothesis is false.

---

[20] Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio, " Writing the History of Sexuality," 493.
[21] Lisa Duggan, "From Instinct to Politics," 95-109.
[22] Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Carol Groneman, *Nymphomania*: *A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2000); Elizabeth Watkins, *On The Pill: A Social History of Contraceptives: 1950-1970* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[23] Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1964); Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the*

The repressive hypothesis claims that since the Victorian era, people have repressed their sexuality, and only allowed sex to be discussed in terms of its reproductive function. "On the subject of sex silence became the rule…modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence," Foucault says in his characterization of the repressive hypothesis.[24] Instead of repressing sex, Foucault argues, Victorians' sexual discourses multiplied during this period. By using euphemisms, society was able to control sex, Foucault argues:

> As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present.[25]

Foucault argues that this myth has remained intact because we take pleasure in constructing sex as forbidden since we enjoy the feeling of transgression, of revealing that secret. He distinguishes Eastern and Western conceptions of sexuality. The former possessed *ars erotica*—the arts of love, learned through sexual acts— and the latter have *scientia sexualis*—the codifying of sex in multiple forms that allow us to experience pleasure in the intellectual uncovering of these forms. He argues that unlike *ars erotica, scientia sexualis* is not democratic. It is constructed through authorities who define and limit it. It requires a professional's interpretation of sexual behavior.

Foucault's theory has been enormously influential to historians of sexuality. However, not all scholars believe that it has been properly understood. In 2002 David Halperin argued that historians have misinterpreted Foucault by claiming that Foucault was instructing scholars to

---

Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Ronald Walters, *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974). See also, Nathan G. Hale Jr, *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1971* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[24] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. I,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 3.

[25] Ibid., 17.

study the history of sexuality as a history of sexual discourses. Halperin argues that this misinterpretation has "preserve[d] the notion of sexuality as a timeless and ahistorical dimension of human experience, while preserving a notion of discourse as a neutral medium of representation." This has caused a split between sexual desire being perceived as ahistorical, while representations of sex are thought of as "socially specific and historically variable products of human culture."[26] Halperin argues this was the opposite of Foucault's intent. Instead, he wanted sexual desire to be historicized. Our notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are modern cultural constructions, not unchanging biological certainties, and therefore should not be retroactively applied to the past, Halperin argued.

Yet even after Foucault, scholars continue to frame their sex histories as repression to liberation, some claiming that the Victorian era is when the repression started, others pushing the date later or moving it earlier. For example, Thomas Laqueur's *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (2003) posits that humanity gradually progressed in its view of masturbation, from treating it as a serious medical problem in the 18th century to a liberatory practice in the 21st.[27]

Yet the Foucouldian impulse is apparent in the strongest scholarship in sexual history, works that challenge the repression-to-liberation argument. In 1988, D'Emilio and Freedman denounced the repression-to-liberation view at the beginning of *Intimate Matters*. They claimed that instead of characterizing the history of sexuality in America as a story of "repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, or enslavement to freedom," they instead show how "sexuality

---

[26] David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9.
[27] Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2003).

has been continually reshaped by the changing nature of the economy, the family, and politics."[28] Similarly, Bailey (2002) argued that the sexual revolution shouldn't be seen as "a contest between the proponents of freedom and the forces of repression."[29] Instead it was caused by the disparity between the public pronouncements that all non-marital sex was immoral and the widespread private behavior of premarital sex. The tension between public morality and private behavior was a defining factor of the sexual revolution. And Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (2002) also frames her book on 19th century sexuality in America in contrast to this repression-to-liberation trope. Other scholars who have questioned this myth have not gone far enough, she argues. They continue "to work within a conceptual framework that allows an easily comprehended conflict between expression and restraint. Instead, she creates a metaphor of four frameworks that represent four different sexual cultures, and discusses how these cultures interacted.[30]

Decoding Sexual Messages To study the history of a taboo product like sex toys, it is necessary to decode the messages advertisers sent to consumers. For social, legal, and political reasons, most advertisers could not explicitly state the features and uses of their products. Consumers were expected to decode the ads. Cultural studies, particularly semiotics, provides a model for decoding of texts. Stuart Hall's (1973) communication model of encoding and decoding posits that messages are encoded with particular values by their creators, but the meanings of these messages change when individuals decode them. "Every visual sign in

[28] D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, xii.
[29] Bailey, *Sex in The Heartland*,10.
[30] Helen Lefkowitz. Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 4.

advertising connotes a quality, situation, value, or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational positioning."[31]

Many scholars in the history of sexuality are faced with the same challenge of analyzing coded sexual discourses. Two scholars who have done this most successfully are George Chauncey and Andrea Tone. In *Gay New York* (1995), Chauncey uses his knowledge of secret gay codes to uncover a flourishing gay male culture from the late 19th century to before World War II. Before Chauncey's work, historians thought that even if a gay subculture existed, it would be difficult to study because it was so hidden, and it was unknown to mainstream culture. However, Chauncey shows that historians could tell the story of this culture by decoding documents using knowledge of codes during this era. The word "gay" was one of these strategically used code words. "Gay men could use it to identify themselves to other gays without revealing their identity to those not in the wise, for not everyone…knew that it implied a specifically sexual preference," Chauncey argues.[32] Similarly, euphemisms used in camouflaged sex-toy advertisements communicated sexual information to customers who were "in the know," while not everyone recognized the terms as sexual.

Andrea Tone (1996) examined the codes in contraceptive ads from the 1930s to demonstrate that Lysol sold their douches as "feminine hygiene" products to consumers who knew that this term was a code word for contraception. "Publicly, manufacturers claimed that feminine hygiene products were sold solely to enhance vaginal cleanliness. Consumers, literally deconstructing advertising text, knew better. Obliquely encoded in feminine hygiene ads and product packaging were indicators of the product's *real* purpose; references to 'protection,'

---

[31] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," (1973) in *The Cultural Studies Reader,* ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1994), 97-98.
[32] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 17.

'security,' or 'dependability' earmarked purported contraceptive properties."[33] Tone argues that consumer knowledge came from "public discussions of birth control," including discussions in magazines.[34] In *Devices and Desires* (2001), Tone further analyzes the history of contraceptive advertising in the United States since the late 1800s. She begins her story with the 1873 Comstock law that made it illegal for businesses to sell or advertise contraceptives. Tone analyzes contraceptive patents and shows how the language describing these patents shifts based on legal regulations. For example, the word "condom" was omitted from early 1900s patents and was changed to "male pouch."[35] Companies used similar euphemisms and coded language in their advertisements to communicate the true uses of their products to the consumer.

Regulating Sexuality 1: Masturbation Much history of sexuality details attempts to regulate sexuality, both sexual behavior and depictions of sex in the media. The history of sex toys intersects with this literature. In this section I will cover the historiography of obscenity laws and masturbation. Most early ads for sex toys only obliquely refer to masturbation, for both legal and cultural reasons, but attitudes towards masturbation are key to understanding attitudes towards sex toys.

Thomas Laqueur (2003), Vern Bullough (1987), and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (1974) say that masturbation began to be demonized as a medical problem in the early 1700s—thanks to the publication of Swiss doctor S.A.D. Tissot's anti-masturbation tract—and ceased being

---

[33] Andrea Tone, "Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s," in *American Sexual Histories,* ed. Elizabeth Reis (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 252.
[34] Ibid., 257, 266(f. 8), 267 (f. 20).
[35] Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 31. See also, Andrea Tone, "Making room for rubbers: Gender, technology, and birth control before the pill," *History and Technology: An International Journal* 18, no. 1 (September 2002): 51-76.

blamed for medical ailments around 1920.[36] However, according to Engelhardt, American physicians did not translate the vice of masturbation into a disease in the late 1800s, allowing them to integrate masturbation "within an acceptable medical model of diagnosis and therapy." His main evidence is annual reports of the Charity Hospital of Louisiana, which showed that in the late 1800s, two patients' deaths were reported to be masturbation-induced, and about five patients a year were hospitalized for masturbation. The fact that so few patients were reported to have died of Onanistic causes undercuts his argument that the mainstream medical community believed that masturbation was a highly dangerous disease.[37]

Laqueur argues that in the mid-19th century masturbation was demonized because of industrialization and the rise of the "modern commercial society." This society prized social behavior, and masturbation's solitary character lent itself to being criticized. In a review essay critiquing Laqueur, Robert Darby (2004) points out the contradictions in this argument: "If solitariness was the main problem, why did preachers against the practice condemn masturbation in groups and pairs even more vigorously?"[38] In a related argument, Paula Bennett (1995) claims that masturbation was not considered as socially unacceptable in the 19th century as many historians have believed. Women's masturbatory fantasies were expressed through poetry produced by mainstream American poets, she says.[39]

---

[36] Vern L. Bullough, "Technology for the prevention of "Les Maladies Produites par la Masturbation," *Technology and Culture*, 28, no.4, (1987): 828-832; Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 35.H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr, "The Disease of Masturbation: Values and Concepts of the Disease," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48, (Summer 1974): 234-48.
[37] Englehardt, "Disease of Masturbation," 236.
[38] Robert Darby, " Review Essay: A Post-Modernist Theory of Wanking: Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation. By Thomas Laqueur," *Journal of Social History* 38, no.1 (2004): 207.
[39] Paula Bennett, " 'Pomegranate-Flowers': The Phantasmic Productions of Late-Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Women Poets," in *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and*

However, anti-masturbation views were strong enough to lead to the creation of devices in the late 1800s that prevented masturbation. Vern Bullough (1987) argues that American technological innovation led to the development of a variety of anti-masturbation devices for men, women, and children in the late 19th to early 20th century. Spurred by the anti-masturbation viewpoints at the time, parents of masturbating children turned to their doctors for help. The doctors, in turn, invented devices to prevent masturbation, such as rings placed through boys' foreskins. Additionally, he details patents for harnesses that fit over genitals, preventing children from touching them. Bullough claims that there was a "large market" for these devices, some of which contained spikes that drove into boys' erections.[40]

Many accounts of the history of attitudes towards masturbation in America focus on famous American anti-masturbation advocates in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Bullough argues that anti-masturbation attitudes in America were widespread, using physician and cereal entrepreneur John Harvey Kellogg as an example of mainstream attitudes. Kellogg believed that masturbation caused "acne, paleness, shifty eyes, the use of tobacco and profanity, bed wetting, and fingernail biting."[41] Because he considered semen to be a vital body fluid essential to male functioning, he argued that masturbation, and even too much sexual intercourse, was dangerous for physical health. Bland foods could counteract the sexual impulse, Kellogg thought, leading him to manufacture corn flakes.[42]

Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism, ed. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario II (New York: Routledge,1995), 189-213.

[40] Vern L. Bullough, "Technology for the Prevention of 'les maladies produites par la masturbation,'" *Technology and Culture* 28, no. 4 (1987): 829.

[41] Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 22.

[42] Ibid.

Since the people who were willing to speak publicly about masturbation were usually condemning it, writing an accurate history of masturbation is challenging. These sources have led many historians to exaggerate cultural fears of masturbation. Most historians have focused on masturbation as a disease paradigm, because they have been able to obtain doctors' records, but few have looked at the hedonistic side of masturbation, probably because almost no masturbators have left detailed records.

Regulating Sexuality 2: Obscenity Law. The history of sex toys in America is inextricably intertwined with the history of obscenity law. Until recently, most scholarship on obscenity laws has ignored sex toys. However, works on the history of vice societies and Anthony Comstock are crucial to my dissertation.

Most historians argue that the Comstock law reflected social beliefs in America at the turn-of-the-19th century. Paul Boyer's *Purity in Print* (2002) argues that Comstock and the vice societies that wanted to ban books were not iconoclastic, but were a part of mainstream reformist thought.[43] Similarly Craig LaMay (1997) argues that Comstock was the "embodiment of Victorian thinking on sex and sexuality," but LaMay counters that Comstock was more concerned with preventing the sexual behavior that he believed resulted from viewing obscene materials than he was about the obscene materials themselves.[44] Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech (1927) also argue that Comstock was not unique in his views, but they say that he was unique in the gumption he had to publicly express them and go after pornographers.[45]

---

[43] Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America From the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).
[44] Craig LaMay, "America's Censor: Anthony Comstock and Free Speech," *Communications and the Law* 19, no.3 (Sept. 1997), 5.
[45] Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York, 1927).

Obscenity laws changed substantially in the mid-to-late 20th century, and, as in the vice societies of the 19th, social movements influenced conceptions of obscenity. The first major change to obscenity law in the 20th century was *Roth v. United States* in 1957, where it was determined that matter was only considered to be obscene if "whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material as a whole appeals to the prurient interest." This liberalized the obscenity statute, yet paradoxically, for the first time, the Court declared that obscenity was not subject to First Amendment Protections. Boyer (2002) argues that the *Roth* decision "was the culmination of a process of liberalization extending back to the 1920s and earlier."[46] Walter Kendrick (1996) argued that "*Roth* cleared nothing up, but it did reflect a new maturity in public discourse on the obscene." A flurry of books about pornography followed the *Roth* decision, Kendrick said, and they had a unified view of pornography: it was an "infantile" media whose only purpose was to arouse its viewers.[47]

The next major change to obscenity law occurred in 1966, with *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, which liberalized the obscenity law again, as a work was only declared obscene if "the material is *utterly* without redeeming social value." According to Donald Downs (1989), *"Memoirs* pushed the Court along the path to concluding that only 'hard-core' pornography…could be designated obscene."[48] Kendrick calls the *Memoirs* decision the beginning of the "post-pornographic era," a time when artistic works like novels and paintings were no longer conflated with pornography.

---

[46] Boyer, *Purity in Print,* 278.
[47] Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)*,* 202, 207.
[48] Donald Downs, *The New Politics of Pornography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 16.

In 1973, obscenity law became less liberal in *Miller v. California*. Works in question now had to have "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" to be legal, as opposed to having a "minimal value as in *Memoirs*." Even though *Miller* tightened obscenity restrictions, after *Miller* fewer obscenity convictions were obtained. Downs argues that the lack of prosecutions was caused by a number of factors including "public tolerance of freedom of choice," "a scarcity of resources," and "confusion over the meaning of key parts of the *Miller* test.[49]

Sexual Revolution The so-called sexual revolution of the late 20th century had profound effects on American culture, although historians disagree about just what it was. John Heindry (1997) argues that America has been in a constant state of sexual revolution since the 1920s, which he breaks into three separate periods. The first period in the early 20th century was centered around Margaret Sanger and the birth control movement. The second period started with Albert Kinsey in the 1940s and runs through the 1950s. And the third period began in the 1960s and ran through to today. This later sexual revolution is the period I am focusing on in my dissertation, a period of roiling social change with the inception of the gay rights' movement, the women's movement, the anti-war movement, and an active counterculture.[50]

Heindry takes a top-down approach to studying the sexual revolution, focusing on key players like *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner. His approach emerges from his reliance on secondary sources, and his belief that the sexual revolution was a male-created movement. In contrast, Beth Bailey focuses on how the sexual revolution affected individuals on a grassroots level. She argues in *Sex in the Heartland* (1999) that the sexual revolution was not only about larger-than-

---

[49] Ibid., 17.
[50] John Heindry, *What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

life figures like Hugh Hefner, but also about average young people trying to navigate a new landscape filled with birth control pills, panty raids, drugs, feminism, and the Vietnam War. America's sexual revolution of the late 1960s "was not created by a set of radicals…and then imposed on the rest of the nation," she says. Instead, "it was forged in America's heartland."[51] Using university town Lawrence, Kansas, as a case study, she shows that residents of this Midwestern city both shaped the nation's sexual revolution and were shaped by it. Bailey argues that national magazines and newspapers made students in Lawrence feel they were part of a sexualized national culture, exposing them to more liberal sexual values.

As I mentioned earlier, a key element of Bailey's argument is that the sexual revolution was more nuanced that most historians give it credit for. It "was not a simple, two-sided contest between the proponents of freedom and the forces of repression." A widening gulf existed between the sexual activities people engaged in privately, and the nearly universal public belief that premarital sex was a sin. The tension between public morality and private behavior is a recurring theme throughout *Sex*.[52]

By starting her book during World War Two, nearly twenty years before the (second) sexual revolution, Bailey is able to demonstrate that the change in sexual mores happened gradually. Revolutionaries did not change sexual behavior; they changed cultural conceptions of sex, Bailey argues. Average middle-class students had already privately started having more sex, but it was only the revolutionaries who were willing to publicly demand the right to have sex outside of marriage. It was a mainstream movement not for freedom to be promiscuous, but freedom from public persecution for normal private sexual behavior.

---

[51] Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*, 3.
[52] Ibid.,10.

While Bailey showed how the sexual revolution affected young people in the Midwest, R. Marie Griffith also investigated a new side of the sexual revolution, by demonstrating how it impacted religious groups. Using Alfred Kinsey's correspondence with religious leaders as evidence, she constructs a narrative that showed howAlfred Kinsey helped shaped Protestant religious thought about sexuality. "Many religious liberals were, in a palpable sense, revolutionary, bearing witness to a new openness and creativity in sexual ethics spurred in no small part by the provocative work and engaged collaboration of Alfred Kinsey," she says.[53]

In addition to highlighting religious aspects of the sexual revolution, scholars have also studied sexual representations in the media during this time. Their studies rarely include analyses of sex-toy advertisements, however. Most works focus on pornography, primarily feminist opposition to it. Much of this work is very good, especially Carolyn Bronstein's book (2011) on the origins of the feminist anti-pornography movement that reframes the historiography. The story of the anti-pornography movement has typically centered on Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon's efforts to ban pornography in Canada and the USA in the early 1980s.[54] In contrast, Bronstein demonstrates that Dworkin and McKinnon were not the originators of anti-pornography attitudes and that such attitudes were rooted in drive among feminists to eliminate sexual images from the mainstream media that began in 1976. The fight against pornography was a strategic choice among some feminists, she argues, because it was a cause that could command broad support.[55]

---

[53] R. Marie Griffith, "The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (Sep. 2008), 377.
[54] See, Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (New York: Scribner, 1995); Heindry, *What Wild Ecstasy,* Chp. 15.
[55] Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

While literature on attitudes towards pornography in the mass media is well developed, very little work exists analyzing the consumer culture surrounding pornography and other sexual products, probably due to a lack of sources. Histories of pornography are more focused on attitudes towards pornography, and rarely focus on marketing campaigns developed by pornography companies.[56] Additionally, very little has been written about the sex-toy industry during the 1970s. Heindry (1997) and Schlosser (2003) touched on the history of sex-toy emporium Doc Johnson, but ignored feminist sex-toy stores. Lynn Comella's dissertation (2004) on feminist sex-toy stores from the 1970s through 2004 provides a detailed narrative of how sex-toy stores transmitted feminist political values through commerce, but its focus is more on the ethnographic studies she did of the stores in the early 2000s, than on how the stores sold sex toys in the 1970s.[57]

The Women's Movement

A well-developed historiography of the women's movement has developed, which informs my chapters on the rise of feminist sex-toy stores and some feminists' identification of the vibrator as a political symbol. Wendy Kline (2010) and Michelle Murphy (2004) have detailed second-wave feminism's alternative health movement that arose out of consciousness-raising groups (CR groups). Their analysis of feminists' challenge to the mainstream medical establishment through engaging in group exercises like pelvic self-exams, informs my arguments

---

[56] Laurence O'Toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999); Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: sex, media and the deomcratisation of desire* (London: Routledge, 2002), 37-48.

[57] Lynn Comella, "Selling Sexual Liberation: Women-Owned Sex Toy Stores and Business of Sexual Change" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2004); Downs, *Politics of Pornography*; Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture,* 10th ann. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Eric Schlosser, *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), Chp. 2.

about the role of feminist sex-toy stores.[58] Anne Enke's (2007) argument that the feminist movement can best be located in a disparate variety of spaces, including women-created commercial spaces is also useful to my dissertation. Enke shows how women used bookstores to create political communities. Sex-toy stores were also outlets for feminist political activism.[59]

Because many of the early feminist vibrator advocates were radical feminists, Echols' (1989) work on the radical feminist movement is relevant to my dissertation. Echols examined the variety of competing discourses of radical feminism during the 1960s and 1970s by interviewing activists as well as studying their print documents, arguing that radical feminists "articulated the earliest and most provocative critiques of the family, marriage, love, normative heterosexuality, and rape."[60]

Consumption and Print Culture

A history of consumption and print culture can shed light on why sex-toy companies advertised in the types of publications they advertised in, as well as how consumers received messages about sex toys. Advertising was the key medium where information about sex toys was disseminated to the public in the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Laird (2001) argues that beginning in the 1870s, advertisements informed consumers about new inventions, while also creating desire for these inventions: "Marketing decisions often determined a business's success as much as, and in some cases more than, did technological innovations."[61]

---

[58] Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 210); Michelle Murphy, "Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

[59] Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

[60] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3-4.

[61] Pamela Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 32. Advertisements shifted from promoting

Lears (1994) argues that since the second half of the 19th century American advertising has transmitted cultural values, and consumer "goods have always served symbolic as well as utilitarian purposes."[62] Fox (1997) says that American advertising has historically both reflected the culture and pushed it in different directions: "Advertising was always both mirror and mindbender…this double-edged role defies generalization and remains the fundamental chicken-and-egg riddle in advertising history."[63] This is an important question for historians of sexual technology, because advertisers layer cultural meanings on material artifacts, co-opting and corrupting themes collected from popular culture, religion, and politics.[64]

Sexual ads for vibrators did not represent a new type of appeal. Sex has permeated American advertising since the 1850s, according to Tom Reichert (2003). It has always been a somewhat effective technique, used to "attract attention…build carefully crafted brand identities, and sell products." Topless women began to appear in ads during this time, primarily ads for tobacco companies. By the early 1900s, images of semi-nude and bare-breasted women were used in the service of soda companies, partly because costs of printing had gone down.[65] But most ads using sex appeals were for non-sexual consumer goods like soda and cigarettes. Sexual products like condoms were usually sold discreetly.

Scholars of print-culture have fairly recently begun shifting their focus from how the producers of print culture disseminated ideas to how readers interpreted print culture. This

---

technological progress and championing industry in the 1830s to 1870s to spotlighting consumer choice and specific categories of consumer goods in the 1880s to early 1900s, Laird argues. She attributes this change to who was creating the ads. Companies created ads in-house in the former period, while ad agencies created most ads in the latter period.

[62] Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 4.

[63] Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 64.

[64] John Staudenmaier and Pamela Walker Lurito Laird, "Review Essay: Advertising History." *Technology and Culture,* Vol. 30, No.4, October 1989.

[65] Tom, Reichert, *The Erotic History of Advertising* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 20.

literature informs my dissertation because consumer interpretations of advertisements are key to my argument about how companies transmitted knowledge of sex toys in 19th and 20th century print culture.

Early studies in print culture examined the producers of print culture, as well as the technology used to create books and newspapers. This approach tended to be too producer-centric and technologically deterministic, but it was important for laying the groundwork for the field. Elizabeth Eisenstein's 1980 *The Printing Press as An Agent of Change* is the key work in the early print-culture field. Eisenstein argues that the introduction of print in the 15th and 16th centuries led to the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and the scientific revolution. Eisenstein's argument tends towards the technologically deterministic, as she claims that it was the printing presses' standardization of books and the machine's ability to print multiple copies quickly and fairly cheaply, as well as the capability of book technology to preserve knowledge, that led to profound changes.[66]

Adrian Johns (1998) challenged Eisenstein by arguing that a monolithic print culture does not exist because individual readers interpret texts in various ways, so it is impossible to understand how certain texts affect society without knowing how readers read them. By using 16th through 18th century London as a case study, he argues that there was not a sweeping print culture in the Western world, but instead there were communities of printers, publishers, and distributers who had their own ways of interacting with print culture. He believes that studying local communities will better help us understand print culture.[67]

---

[66] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[67] Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Yet determining how individuals read texts is difficult. David Nord was able to get at the answer to how people were reading newspapers in the early 20th century by examining letters to the editor in his book *Communities of Journalism* (2001). Nord analyzes letters to the editor written to *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Chicago Herald* from 1912-1917 to prove that American readers did not interpret newspaper articles in uniform ways. What he found is that readers responded to the same newspaper texts in wildly different manners. He argued that readers "replenish the text, make sense of it, and see the text through the lenses of interpretive strategies provided by interpretive communities; it involved the codes and canons of culture."[68] Nord's argument can also be applied to how readers interpreted advertisements, especially as presses began to be more commercial.[69]

The commercialization of the press happened in the late-19th century, when the penny press began defining readers as consumers, whereas previously the press had defined readers as voters, argues Gerald Baldasty (1992). This was caused by their reliance on advertisers for funding, instead of their prior reliance on political patronage, he says. When newspapers began to see their readers as consumers and their goal as delivering the largest and wealthiest audience to advertisers, they stopped carrying as much political news. Instead they began carrying multiple types of content such as comics, fiction, and entertainment news because were trying to appeal to the largest audience, an audience that included women. They also skewed their

---

[68] David Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 246.

[69] For more on how readers' read texts, see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

editorials to appeal to advertisers, and engaged in "puff" pieces where they praised their advertisers but disguised it as journalism.[70]

History of Technology

The history of sex toys intersects with the history of technology, as sex toys are a form of technology, albeit a rarely-studied form. In this section I will discuss user-shaping of technologies as well as technologies and the body.

The history of sex toys is a field where studies of both the consumers and the producers are essential because consumers were expected to decipher the sexual hieroglyphics hidden in the coded advertisements. They had to infer uses of vibrators and other coded sex products through deconstructing euphemisms in user manuals. They had to learn their own bodies, determining where and with what pressure the sex toys would feel the best. Users of sex toys have been written out of the history. This is mainly a problem with sources, because these users did not leave written records of their sexual behavior. Therefore, the historian has to analyze the ads and instruction books for suggestive messages, decoding the discourse.

Historians of technology have fortunately made this shift from a focus on industrial systems and producers to a focus on the consumer and user. Ruth Cowan Schwartz (1987) is one of the pioneers of this approach. She argues that consumers affect which types of technological artifacts societies adopt, and they should be considered as part of the technological network. The best way to study consumers' adoption of technologies is at the "consumption junction," the

---

[70] Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). For more on the commercialization of newspapers, see also, Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News, A Social History of American Newspapers.* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); For the history of the celebrity puff piece, see Charles Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

place and the time at which the consumer makes choices between competing technologies," she says.[71]

Technology is not foisted on hapless consumers, Cowan argues. Although Cowan analyzes the adoption of the stove in the late 19th century, her theories can easily be applied to the adoption of vibrators or other sexual technologies. Their choice of whether to purchase certain sex toys shaped the technology because it determined which types of sex toys were produced, and the popularity of sex devices spurred competition in the market.

Another theory that allows for consumer power, but in a limited way is the "mediation junction" theory that builds on Cowan. Ruth Oldenziel, Adri Albert de la Bruheze, and Onno de Wit (2005) incorporate "the state, the market, and civil society" into the consumption junction model to create what they term a "mediation junction" that provides a more complex look at how consumers choose between differing technologies, demonstrating that consumers' technological choices are constrained by external forces.[72] They argue that consumers do not have limitless choices, so their sphere of influence is limited, but still important. Sexual device purchasers had this limited form of power. They did not design sex toys, but they may have influenced their design. Consumers affect the use of technologies, so even when an inventor or producer has a specific intent for their technology, the consumer may ignore it. Even if some vibrator companies designed their vibrators for leg and back massage, consumers probably experimented with other forms of massage, including genital.

---

[71] Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems. New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. Thomas P. Hughes, Trevor J. Pinch, and Wiebe E. Bijker (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 263.

[72] Ruth Oldenziel, Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, and Onno de Wit," Europe's Mediation Junction: Technology and Consumer Society in the 20th Century," *History and Technology* 21 (2005): 107-139,127.

A prime example of applying the consumption junction model to the history of consumerism can be seen in Ronald Kline's *Consumers in the Country* (2000), where he demonstrates that consumers affected the way that certain technologies developed in rural areas. He argues that rural citizens actively resisted some technologies, while whole-heartedly adopting others. Consumption is not a passive activity, and consumers, not just producers and mediators, have agency, he claims. For example, in the early 20th century, American telephone companies were forced to adapt to rural consumers' desires to listen in on party lines (eavesdropping), a practice many companies wanted to eliminate. People's values or practices did not automatically change because new technology was introduced, says Kline. Instead, they adapted new technologies to already-established social practices. They "transplanted the venerated custom of rural visiting or neighboring to the party line."[73]

Michele Martin (1998) also argues for consumer shaping in her article about telephone use in the early 1900s. She shows that prior to the 20th century, male-owned telephone companies promoted the telephone for business purposes, while women ignored their advice, and began to use the phone for conversation. Upset telephone companies "condemned… lengthy chats on the telephone." However, women insisted on using the phone for social purposes, and this influenced the male-dominated companies' conceptions of the telephone, "shifting it from a strictly business-oriented [device] to one oriented toward socialization," which also led to an "expansion of the system, not only in business areas of cities and big towns, but in residential sectors and in rural areas."[74]

---

[73] Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and social change in Rural America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 53.

[74] Michelle Martin, "The Culture of the Telephone," in *Sex/Machine : Readings in Culture, Gender, and Technology*, ed. Patricia D. Hopkins (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 72.

Female consumers' have affected the design of other technologies, according to Judy McGaw (1988). They influenced bra design by accepting or rejecting commercial bras, and by modifying them to work more effectively. She argues that "neither tools nor professional technologists determine the ultimate form of a technological activity: purchasers and users do."[75] I argue the same type of user shaping of the sexual device.

Although Kline, Martin, and McGaw convincingly demonstrate the user shaping of the telephone and bra, this does not prove that all users of technology effect change. However, it shows that in certain cases, users do have an impact. When historians include this perspective, they are able to tell more accurate histories of artifacts.

Sex Toys and STS

The history of the sex toys intersects with several recent trends in science and technology studies (STS) and the history of technology, particularly the growing interest in technology and the body. My analysis of the history of sex toys suggests a new direction for this research, the study of bodily technologies subject to powerful taboos. For such technologies, discourse has almost always diverged from use, until recently. The vibrator in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is an exemplar of this divergence. Because the vibrator's sexual uses were taboo, the discourse about it could only refer obliquely to its sexual uses. As a result, evidence for the sexual uses of the vibrator requires a decoding of this discourse in terms of the dominant symbolic systems of the era.[76]

---

[75] Judy McGaw, "No Passive Victims; No Separate Spheres: A Feminist Perspective on Technology's History," in *In Context: History and the History of Technology—Essays in Honor of Mel Kranzenberg*, ed. Stephen Cutliffe and Robert W. Post (Bethleham, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1988), 16.

[76] Many technologies of the body require a similar reading, for example vaginal and anal dilators and douches, pessaries, and abortifacients. See Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires*.

Existing studies of bodily technologies are beginning to conceptualize this divergence between discourse and use. Overviews of this field typically begin with Donna Haraway's argument (1985) that feminist scholars should conceptualize humans as cyborgs, "a hybrid of machine and organism." Haraway argued that the "political myth" of the cyborg would liberate women by blurring the boundaries between various dichotomies like technology and nature, male and female, and human and machine.[77] Haraway's work was important for opening up the field, but recent studies of the body and technology have more relevance to sex toys, especially studies of medical technologies. Michelle Murphy (2004), Ericka Johnson (2007) and Lisa Moore (1997) have shown how the meanings of and discourse surrounding medical technologies depends on their users. Murphy demonstrates how radical feminists transformed medical devices, including the speculum and menstrual extractors, into tools of liberation.[78] Ericka Johnson explores how medical educators "reconstitute" the body when they use both images of patients' bodies and their own bodies as points of reference during surgical simulations.[79] Moore argues

---

[77] Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* 80 (1985), 65. Haraway's cyborg concept is not without its critics. Judy Wacjman argues that Haraway's cyborg isn't inherently liberatory, see: Judy Wacjman, *Technofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press*,* 2004), 78-101. For other critiques of Haraway, see: Casper Bruun Jensen, "Developing/development cyborgs*,*" *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (special issue on "Cyborg Embodiment: Affect, Agency and Responsibility"), vol. 7 no. 3 (2008) 375-385.
For other conceptions of the cyborg, see: Peter Galison, "The ontology of the enemy Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 228-266
For a survey of recent uses of Haraway's cyborg, see: Lupton, "The Digital Cyborg Assemblage Haraway's cyborg theory and the new digital health technologies (preprint). in Collyer, F. (ed) (forthcoming), *The Handbook of Social Theory for the Sociology of Health and Medicine* (Houndmills*: Palgrave* Macmillan).
[78] Michelle Murphy, "Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004).
[79] Ericka Johnson, "Surgical Simulators and Simulated Surgeons: Reconstituting Medical Practice and Practitioners in Simulations," *Social Studies of Science* 37, no. 4 (August 2007), 585-608.

that sex workers shape latex technology through use, leading to uses not intended by manufacturers, such as using Saran Wrap for safer sex.[80] Anni Dugdale (2000) argues that technologies can shape the meanings of the body of its users. Dugdale demonstrates that the symbolism surrounding the Intrauterine Contraceptive Device (IUD) in the 1930s constructed women's bodies as capable of receiving as much sexual pleasure as that of men, while the 1960s IUD made the female body "subject to the management of experts."[81] Angus McLaren (2007), Elisabeth Stephens (2011), and Sharra Vostral (2008) use visual culture to show how the sexual body was created in the 19th and 20th century. McLaren's analysis of impotence technologies, from vacuum pumps to Viagra, shows that the meanings of sexual technologies can be teased out through close readings of advertisements and medical tracts, an approach especially relevant to the history of the vibrator.[82]

Organization of Dissertation

My dissertation requires me to examine a wide variety of scholarly literatures in multiple disciplines, and, in effect, define the field of research that I am pursuing. My combination of the fields of the history of sexuality, history of consumption, and the history of technology gives me freedom to pursue a unique type of historical study, even though my approach requires me to cover a lot of ground.

---

[80] Lisa Jean Moore,"' It's like you use pots and pans to cook. It's the tool': The Technologies of Safer Sex," *Science, Technology and Human Values* (1997) 22(4):434-471.
[81] Anni Dugdale, Intrauterine Contraceptive Devices, "Situated Knowledges, and the Making of Women's Bodies," *Australian Feminist Studies,* (2000) 15, no. 32,165 - 176.
[82] Elizabeth Stephens, "Tact/ility in Nineteenth-Century Medical Photographs and Models," in *Bodies, Sex, and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan (Houndsmills, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 87-101.; Sherra Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 61; Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

The first half of my dissertation (1870-1930) structured around the history of two technological innovations, rubber vulcanization and electric power. These innovations made possible the rubber dildo and the electric vibrator. The introduction of each of these technologies led to widespread changes in manufacturing, and made possible the development of innovative consumer products, including many sexual devices. Neither of these technologies was developed with the goal of producing sex toys. Instead, when these technologies were introduced, inventors quickly found ways to adapt them for purposes of sexual stimulation. During this era, sex toys were sold under the guise of medical devices and small household appliances. These disguises allowed companies to advertise sex toys widely in mainstream media without violating social mores or anti-obscenity laws.

My second chapter begins in the mid-1800s when Charles Goodyear perfected the rubber vulcanization process, leading to companies' manufacture of rubber phalluses in the late 1800s. Because so many large rubber manufacturers produced sex products, it is a story that is intimately tied to the birth of the rubber industry in America, a larger narrative that provides the context. In this chapter, I tell the story of rectal and vaginal dilators which were the precursors to dildos. I show how eminent physician James Marion Sims invented the disease of vaginismus, while also creating a line of phallic rubber vaginal dilators to cure the condition. I contrast this story with the less celebrated Dr. F. E. Young's creation and marketing of rubber rectal dilators which he sold as cures for everything from hemorrhoids to asthma. I show how the medicalization of the technology of rubber phalluses legitimized these devices and allowed them to be sold without violating obscenity laws.

These strict obscenity laws came about around the same time as Sims and Young were on the market, and the laws were pushed forth by vice reformer Anthony Comstock. Comstock and

his organization, The New York Society For the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), campaigned against the rubber industry during the late 1800s and early 1900s. This anti-sex toy campaign is the subject of my third chapter. Comstock and the NYSSV tried to destroy the sex-toy industry by means of a national law that made sex toys and sex-toy advertisements illegal. Comstock and his allies opposed sex toys because they ascribed to a Protestant ethos that feared non-procreative sex. They shifted their focus from erotic novels and images to sex toys because they were being ridiculed by newspapers for violating free speech rights, and the banning of sex toys did not violate the First Amendment.

In my fourth chapter, I examine how sex-toy companies marketed their devices during the Comstock era. I argue that Comstock did not destroy the sex-toy industry. Instead, sex-toy companies strategically changed their advertising to conform to the new laws, using euphemisms that both conveyed the sexual uses of the devices to consumers while also hiding them from censors. I show that the rise of the penny press in the late 19th century meant that more newspapers had to rely upon advertising, creating a willingness for papers to carry marginally legal ads, including those for sex-toys.

The next piece to my story is the history of the vibrator in America, which makes up my fifth chapter. This story begins in the early 1900s, when vibrators were one of the first small electrified appliances to be marketed for the home. They were mass-produced and advertised to both genders in mainstream newspapers and magazines as medical appliances. The vibrator succeeded despite societal and legal proscriptions against public discussions of sex because it was a dual-use technology, a technology known to have both sexual and non-sexual uses. I use advertisements to show how companies strategically employed the vibrator's non-sexual uses to frame the technology as both a small household appliance and an electrotherapeutic device.

The second half of my dissertation (1969-2014) is structured around technologies in use. Although there were changes in materials used to manufacture sex toys after the 1950s, these were not as important to the industry as rubber and electricity. Instead, changing societal attitudes towards sexuality in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, gave the technology new meanings. Events like the publication of the Kinsey Reports on sexual behavior and the debut of *Playboy* led to a more open sexual discussion in the 1950s. The commercial availability of the birth control pill, the Stonewall riots, and a general change in mores in the 1960s and 1970s led to sexual devices being openly marketed, and not advertised with euphemisms as they were in the first one hundred years of their commercialization. Some feminists embraced vibrators as liberatory symbols, even creating female-owned stores that marketed sex toys to women. Yet greater openness about sex toys helped marginalize them within mainstream culture. Advertisements virtually disappeared from mainstream publications and were instead relegated to fringe media such as underground newspapers.

In the sixth chapter, I examine the status of the vibrator during the sexual revolution. I show how Betty Dodson co-opted vibrators as a symbol of women's empowerment, teaching women how to have orgasms with vibrators in her consciousness-raising workshops. I tell the story of how Dodson formally introduced vibrators into the women's movement during the 1973 National Organization of Women Conference in New York City, yet she struggled to win over all in the movement, and battled to get *Ms.* magazine to run her essay on the liberating powers of masturbation.

My seventh chapter continues the story of feminism and sex toys during the sexual revolution, but it focuses on the development of the first feminist sex-toy stores and consumer

shaping of sex toys. I tell the story of Dell Williams and her sex-toy store Eve's Garden, analyzing how Williams imbued sex toys with feminist values. I also show how she encouraged her consumers to influence sex-toy design, as well as the struggles that Williams and other feminist sex-toy store owners had in convincing publications to run their advertisements. Ironically, the sexual revolution caused sex toys to be less visible in mainstream culture, and forced sex-toy ads into the underground press, and their advertisements became relegated to niche magazines with a sexually liberated readership.

Finally, in my concluding chapter I discuss representations of sex toys in popular culture in both the mainstream and underground media from the 1970s to 2014. After the 1970s, sex toys gradually reentered mainstream popular culture in TV shows and films, yet they were usually portrayed negatively. Most representations were limited to fringe media in the 1970s, such as underground comics and films. Female comics artists portrayed vibrators as symbols of liberation, while male artists portrayed sex toys as threats to masculine sexual prowess. I then discuss sex toys' reentry into mainstream American culture in the 21st century, as TV shows and films began include more sex-toy scenes. Although sex-toy depictions grew more frequent, most of these depictions were negative and showed characters being shamed by family and religious officials. Even in the first decade of the 21st century, sex toys were still rarely marketed in the mainstream media, and when they were, the remained controversial.

Chapter Two - Curing "the sexual wrecks of humanity": Rubber Dildos in 19th Century Medicine

The dildo is a mysterious device, an object that lacks a formal history, a technology that nobody wants to take credit for, a device whose origins have been willfully obscured, erased from history as if ignoring the device is the polite and civilized thing for a culture to do. Or if it is given a history, it is an obscure one, as an embarrassment, as a salacious side note to the real histories of technologies, the histories of industries. The dildo, however, is a part of these larger

histories. The fact that artificial representations of penises have been routinely ignored as worthy objects of study is a testament to their power. It is a power that is so strong that the archaeologists who dug up Pompeii, a group of people who value objects with a fervor few people have, sequestered them, along with erotic frescoes, into a "secret museum" that only men were allowed to enter. They were so embarrassed about this part of humanity's cultural heritage that if the Pompeian guidebooks mentioned a Priapus statue, the author "apologized for it."[1] The goal of this chapter is to bring the history of the dildo to light, not as a curiosity, as the lobster boy of the circus sideshow of history, but as a part of the three-ring show.

This was not my intent. I thought that I would be writing a history whose value was in its obscurity, in the fact that I was touching a subject nobody would ever discuss in the hallowed ground of academic conferences, unless it was bandied about in so many euphemistic layers and with such an air of self-importance that it had become indistinguishable from other subjects, that it had the patina of respectability and familiarity that the use of academic jargon bestows on even the most reviled subjects. But as I investigated the dildo, as I exhumed it from its cultural grave, I quickly realized that, in fact, its history was connected to larger historical stories. The dildo was connected with the stories of the birth of American industry and the medical profession before it ever became a mass-marketed consumer appliance. It is, in fact, impossible to tell the story of the mass-produced dildo in America without telling the story of the rubber industry.

The history of rubber in America has always been told as a story of innovation that culminates in the crowning moment: the development of the pneumatic tire. This narrative inextricably intertwines the history of rubber with the history of the automobile, whose success would not have been so swift or overarching without the shock-stabilizing inflatable rubber tire.

---

[1] Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 8.

Since tire companies wrote most of the early histories, this is not a surprising development.[2] But companies that went on to specialize only in tires did not start out their lives with the tire in mind. And that is where the story gets interesting.

When new communication technologies are invented, new commercial sexual products follow. It is an axiom that many take to heart. Scholars have argued that pornography has driven technological innovation and has caused communication technologies to become widely adopted. Because entrepreneurs in the sex industry are more risk-averse than other business people, they are quicker to adapt new technologies, as well as to innovate within the technologies themselves, so the argument goes. The pornography-co-opting-new-technology argument is so common as to have become cliché, as evidenced by the fact that the Broadway musical *Avenue Q* featured a song devoted to the theme: "The Internet is For Porn." The sexualization of new communication technologies is lamented by some, but not all. Peter Johnson argues that:

> Far from viewing cyberpornographers as pariahs, society would do well to view them as mountain men and women in the mold of Jedediah Smith, who discovered and opened the passes of the Rockies for entire families to follow West…Though uncivilized, they showed the roads for civilization to follow.[3]

But this argument is not just made about current advances in technology. Scholars argue that the popularity of erotic pictures among soldiers lead to a boon in photography during the Civil War period, a scandal that became so enormous that it led to anti-obscenity legislation. Similar stories

---

[2] See, Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear,* 3rd ed. (Akron, Ohio: The Superior Printing and Lithography Company, 1937); Mansel G. Blackford and K. Austin Kerr, *BFGoodrich: Tradition and Transformation, 1870-1895* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996); Steve Love and David Giffels, *Wheels of Fortune: The Story of Rubber in Akron* (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 1999); Maurice O'Reilly, *The Goodyear Story* (Elmsford NY: Benjamin Company, 1983).

[3] Peter Johnson, "Pornography Drives Technology: Why Not to Censor the Internet," in *Pornography: Private Right or Public Menace* edited by Robert M. Baird & Stuart E. Rosenbaum (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998): 80-93,86.

can be told about the printing press, film, and the VCR.[4] The same holds true for the mid-19th century American rubber industry, except instead of the sex industry co-opting technological innovations, the innovators themselves delved headfirst into the world of sex toys.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the history of rubber, then I will detail two of the sexualized applications of rubber: the vaginal and anal dilator. Like the vibrator and other sexual technologies, the vulcanized rubber phallus began its life as a medical technology. Called *vaginal dilator,* it was the vulcanized rubber dildo's precursor. Although vaginal dilators were essentially the same artifacts as *dildos,* their medical legitimacy conveyed on them a "morality" that allowed them to exist in American culture without being labeled *immoral rubber goods*, a category that became illegal in 1873. In this chapter I will show how dilators were accepted in medical culture because they were championed by the eminent physician J. Marion Sims. He prescribed his brand of vaginal dilator for the disease of *vaginismus*, a disease he "discovered," which involved a tightening of the vagina that prevented sexual intercourse. As long as the rubber phallus was used as a tool that facilitate married sexual intercourse, it was granted legitimacy in American culture in the 19th century. In the next chapter, I demonstrate that the rubber dildo was not granted the same carte blanche because it was used for masturbation and thus was perceived as threatening to the social order of heterosexual marriage.

I follow this discussion of the *vaginal dilator* with an exploration of the rubber *anal dilator*, a device promoted by the less celebrated physician, Dr. F.E. Young. He created a medical journal to detail his "orificial theories" that posited that the rectum was the center of health, and that many diseases could be cured through the dilation of the rectum, using his own

---

[4] See, Jonathan Coopersmith, "Pornography, Technology, and Progress," in *Icon: Journal of the International Committee for the History of Technology*, Jan. 4, 1998; Laurence O'Toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), Chapter 8.

brand of rectal dilators. Because Young did not have a stellar reputation like Sims, his dilation cures were not taken as seriously, and he began marketed his rectal dilators directly to consumers instead of solely to the medical community.

History of Rubber

The story of rubber is different from the story of other technologies that have been driven by sex in that it does not involve the revolution of a communication technology, but of a material technology. And it did not become sexualized until means were developed to stabilize it. Caoutchouc, as the raw rubber is called, has a long history of being manipulated by humans. Pre-Columbian Amazonians in the 13th century are thought to be the first groups of people to use rubber. One of the first caoutchouc creations was the rubber ball, but the Amazonions also learned to make objects like shoes and bottles by "applying successive coats to clay or wooden molds and by exposing them to a dense smoke, constantly turning them until, layer by layer, the shoe or bottle or jar was built up."[5] Other applications included syringes and rubber animals.[6] Aztecs also created rubber raincoats and other waterproof rubber clothing that had an unfortunate tendency to liquefy when exposed to heat.[7]

Obtained from the fluid of the *Hevea brasiliensis* tree, rubber in its raw form was time-consuming to tap and difficult to work with.[8] Like the Amazonians, nearly all early cultures that came across rubber created balls, and, in turn, developed elaborate games to play with them.[9] It is this spirit of creativity and playfulness that runs through the history of rubber, and informs the

---

[5] Howard & Ralph Wolf, *Rubber*: *A Story of Glory and Greed* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936), 19.
[6] Ibid., 20.
[7] John Tully, *Devil's Milk: A Social History of Rubber* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 30.
[8] Other trees produce rubber, but this was the predominant natural source in the mid-19th century.
[9] Wolf & Wolf, *Rubber,* 15-29.

story of the history of the dildo. Both the rubber ball and the dildo are adult toys that arguably lack a utilitarian purpose. This is not to say that the history of rubber is a joyful one; it is also filled with slavery and the destruction of natural forests. There is a reason rubber's nickname is "the devil's milk."

The first commercial applications of rubber came in the late 1700s with the creation of erasers. A widely circulated story claims that this is where rubber got its name: for its use to "rub out pencil marks."[10] Historian John Tully claims that no evidence exists for this, and the origins of rubber are unknown. It came to be known as India rubber because much rubber originated from the West Indies.[11]

It was not until the 1830s when the rubber manufacturing business in America began. Edwin M. Chaffee established the first rubber manufacturing company in America, the Roxbury India Rubber Factory in 1832. It produced "shoes, life preservers, coats, caps, wagon covers and carriage traces."[12] Other companies sprung up in New England, but none were successful because before the vulcanization process was discovered, rubber products were unreliable. Rubber became brittle in cold weather and melted in warm temperatures. Once consumers experienced episodes like their rubber suspenders "melt[ing] at body temperature," they were inclined to never purchase rubber again.

One of Chaffee's most inquisitive employees was a young man by the name of Charles Goodyear.[13] His interest in rubber was founded in a scientific curiosity, not in a desire to make money. Goodyear saw potential in rubber, but he thought that rubber in its current form was going to be limited in its applications.

---

[10] Wolf, & Wolf, *Rubber,* 289.
[11] Tully, *Devil's Milk,* 20-21.
[12] Wolf & Wolf, *Rubber,* 296.
[13] Tully, *Devil's Milk,* 40; Wolf & Wolf, *Rubber,* 297.

After fifteen years experimenting with rubber, which led to a stint in debtors' prison, Goodyear finally figured out how to create a hardy rubber that could withstand the elements when he arrived at his rubber vulcanization process, which he patented in 1844. This process involved adding sulfur and lead to rubber and then heating the mixture to create a more stable material.[14] Even the name bestowed upon the process, *vulcanization*, is emblematic of how important his discovery was, as the moniker originated from the Roman God of fire, Vulcan. Goodyear did not intend to kick start the American sex toy industry. But that is what vulcanization did, as it allowed companies to develop rubber phalluses and French ticklers that did not melt when they came into contact with body heat. [15]

Although Charles Goodyear's name is synonymous with rubber and the Goodyear Rubber Company, he did not die a rich man. He believed in his dream of vulcanization even as his community mocked him and his family suffered. The name of the contemporary rubber company was chosen as homage to Goodyear. In fact, it was founded after his death. But what Goodyear lacked in business acumen, he made up for in ideas.[16]

Vulcanized rubber was a muse to Goodyear, launching his imagination. Rubber, like many new technologies, had a utopian sheen to it. Rubber would change the world, Goodyear thought. In 1853, Charles Goodyear self-published a book listing over 1,000 possible applications of the newly sturdy rubber. He believed that rubber could transform education, particularly through the use of the rubber globe, which was cheaper than the current models

---

[14] Glenn D. Babcock, *History of the United States Rubber Company: A Case Study in Corporate Management* (Bloomington, Ind.: The Foundation for the School of Business: Indiana University, 1966), 12-13.
[15] Wolf & Wolf, *Rubber,* 313.
[16] Wolf & Wolf, *Rubber,* 331-332.

available.[17] His other ideas included using rubber to manufacture durable and inexpensive illuminated maps, boxing gloves, flutes, fishing rods, children's bird toys, breast pumps, and air pontoon boats.

But dreaming up a variety of rubber objects is a lot different than actually producing them. Rubber companies did not always listen to Goodyear, who until 1865 retained the patent on his vulcanization process. For a company to use this patent, Goodyear had to license them first. Therefore, the early years of the rubber industry were dominated by Goodyear's attempts to shape the types of products his licensees' produced. To Goodyear's dismay, his licensees were more interested in producing rubber-soled shoes than the host of creative applications that he listed in his book. However in the 1850s, he was able to persuade the Union Rubber Company to produce a variety of medical rubber goods, one of the rubber applications that he was passionate about. "Medical faculty were among the first who gave attention to the experiments for the purpose of improving gum-elastic, and next to the erasing of pencil marks, it was used for medical and surgical purposes, " Goodyear said.[18] Hot water bottles, inflatable hospital beds, hernia trusses, stethoscopes, baby bottle nipples, and syringes were just some of the medical uses that he mentioned in his book.[19] But Goodyear also suggested sexual uses for rubber, including pessaries (a 19th century term for the diaphragm), gonorrhea bags, and syringes.[20] (Fig. 1)

Vulcanization turned around the rubber industry and led to a Wild West atmosphere that caused companies to engage in a strategy of diversification, producing any product that they

---

[17] Charles Goodyear, *Gum-Elastic and Its Varieties: with a detailed account of its applications and uses, and of the discovery of vulcanization* (New Haven: Published for the Author, 1853), 2:25.
[18] Ibid., 2:165.; Wolf, *Rubber,* 401-402.
[19] Goodyear, Physicians' catalogs show even more applications, including rubber feet for use with artificial legs, male and female urinals, and catheters. Price list of physicians' supplies [manufactured by] Chas. Truax & co, 1890, 385-402, 488, & 937.
[20] Goodyear, *Gum-Elastic,* 172-174.

thought would sell, including many sexual products, like contraceptives and dildos. (Figure 2) [21] This thriving competitive environment led to an explosion in advertising by rubber companies who were eager to create distinctive brands. Using elaborate logos, rubber companies peppered magazines and newspapers with their ads that emphasized the superiority of vulcanized India rubber to the brittle rubber that had come before it.[22] Before the pneumatic tire became widely adopted in 1888, rubber companies depended on a strategy of diversification to make a profit. And the industry was a large one[23]: "By 1870 the United States had fifty-six manufacturers of rubber and elastic goods capitalized at $7.5 million and employing 6,025 people."[24]

Although the rubber industry created products for a number of industries, it is unclear why rubber companies entered the sex toy business. The cliché that sex sells does not answer the question, but it does provide a starting point.[25] Manufacturing and advertising sex toys was a risky endeavor in the late 19th century. Companies could be arrested for violating obscenity laws if they used so-called prurient advertising and they could have their machinery and sexual goods confiscated. A conundrum was created: companies believed that consumers wanted new sexual products, but societal restraints prevented them from communicating this message. All the messages to consumers had to be sent in code; companies had to hint at sexiness in their ads for sexual products without being too crude. Marketing sexual products required companies to devise codes that served a dual purpose: cluing consumers into the sexual uses of their products

---

[21] The history of rubber and contraceptives has been well-documented, but the history of rubber and sex toys has been virtually ignored. For more on contraceptives and rubber, see Collier, *Condom,* 134-138.
[22] Tully, *Devil's Milk,* 23.
[23] It was patented in America in 1846. Harvey S. Firestone Jr. *The Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry* (Firestone Tire and Rubber Company: 1932), 33.
[24] Mansel G. Blackford and K. Austin Kerr, *BFGoodrich: Tradition and Transformation 1870-1995.* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 13.
[25] Tom Reichert, *The Erotic History of Advertising* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 46-65.

and going over the heads of censors. If they failed in this task, the best-case scenario was that the ads would be indecipherable to consumers, and the products would not sell. In the worse case scenario, they would face arrest and financial hardship.

So clearly rubber companies had to have an enormous incentive to produce and sell products that could ruin them financially and destroy their reputations. A possible explanation is that rubber company owners were iconoclasts. During the mid-1800s consumers still associated rubber with brittle shoes and melting suspenders, so those who wanted to enter the industry had to be confident enough that they believed they would be able to transform rubber's reputation. A revolution in the manufacturing of rubber caused renewed interest in this industry, but its prior reputation made most entrepreneurs shy away from it.

Companies incorporated sex toys into the umbrella category of druggist sundries, one of the most popular applications of rubber goods. This category covered the water bottles, syringes, diaphragms, and baby bottle nipples mentioned earlier. The sexualized items were not too far afield from these other products. For example, inflatable breasts did not stand out too much when they were featured in the same context as rubber nipples, while vaginal syringes were innocently placed next to non-sexual syringes. The dildos and anal stimulators stood out more, but usually they were referred to by the medicalized names of *vaginal syringes* and *dilators.* [26]

Rubber Dilators

Thick phallic devices made of hard rubber began showing up in medical catalogs in the mid-1800s. Labeled vaginal and anal dilators, these appliances were sold to physicians as cures for sexual diseases, constipation, and enlarged prostates. Vaginal dilators were straight cylinders with a flared base (Fig. 3), while the rectal dilators looked like Christmas trees, with a triangular

[26] I will discuss vaginal syringes in more detail in Chapter 3.

base that tapered to form a point (Fig. 4). Like vibrators and some other sexualized technologies, vulcanized rubber dilators were dual-use technologies, that is they could both be used to produce sexual pleasure and be used for medical purposes. For example vaginal dilators could be used for masturbation and to dilate the cervix to induce pregnancy. Similarly, anal dilators purportedly cured hemorrhoids, yet they could also provide pleasure through prostate stimulation. Medical journals and physician-directed advertisements were usually silent on possible masturbatory uses of these clearly phallic rubber objects.

In the early 19th century, before the introduction of vulcanized rubber, dilators were made of glass and metal. Even after the introduction of rubber dilators, physicians continued to use glass dilators, which had the unfortunate tendency to shatter in the vagina, leading some doctors to protest their use as dangerous.[27] Physicians' choice of what type of dilator to use was important because doctors' roles had expanded in the mid-19th century. According to the historians D'Emilio and Freedman this change was caused by "increasing secularization" in the United States that led to a "shift [in] authority over sexuality from clergy to doctors."[28]

Foucault argues that the medicalization of sexuality is a trademark of Western cultures. He calls this *scientia sexualis*, where knowledge of sex is spread through medical institutions. This began in the 19th century where

> the sexual domain was no longer accounted for simply by the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression, but was placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological…sex appeared as an extremely unstable pathological field: a surface of repercussion for other ailments, but also the focus of a specific nosography…sex would derive its meaning and its necessity from medical interventions.[29]

---

[27] "The Danger of Glass Vaginal Dilators," Letter to *Medical News* August 2, 1884, 45, no. 5, 135.
[28] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 67.
[29] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, 67.

This medicalization meant that sex toys could be openly discussed within the context of disease. They could be prescribed and used by housewives as long as they were framed as technologies that furthered conventional notions of sexuality. If they were used to strengthen sexual bonds within heterosexual marriages, they were accepted. Little has changed in the 21st century.

Doctors crafted sexual medical ailments that required dilators for treatment then took out patents on their own dilators, thereby branding both the disease and the cure. Doctors relied on alternate forms of marketing, the most common being writing medical journal articles touting the use of their brand of dilator. Other physicians followed in kind, diagnosing the new sexual diseases, using dilators as treatments, and recommending these dilators by name in their self-congratulatory journal articles. This system worked well when the physicians were highly respected because it did not look like marketing. But when the doctor creating the dilator had a poor reputation, more elaborate marketing techniques were needed. The amount of advertising skill required to sell dilators was inversely related to the reputation of the doctor putting his name on them.

Companies marketed their dilators to physicians via enormous catalogs that were filled with thousands of medical devices. They also advertised in consumer health magazines and medical journals. But the most common type of advertising for vaginal dilators was via academic article. In medical journals, doctors recommended the use of vaginal dilators for sexual ailments.

J. Marion Sims and Vaginismus

One of the most influential physicians to incorporate vaginal dilators into his treatments was James Marion Sims. Born in Lancaster, South Carolina, in 1813 to parents who were not

educated but wanted their son to be, Sims was not ambitious in his early years. Although his parents wanted him to be a lawyer, he rejected this path in college. His parents' views were understandable as the field of medicine was only beginning to get legitimacy when Sims was a young adult. He stumbled into gynecology by accident, when another doctor begged him to help treat one of his female patients. When he found that he excelled at treating her, he started to work in the field.[30]

Sims (Fig. 5) is a controversial figure in the history of medicine for his experimentations on slaves, as well as his penchant for performing surgery on female patients' genitals.[31] In his quest to cure the vesico-vaginal fistula, Sims performed multiple operations on the same women who were not able to give full consent. These fistulas were life-ruining conditions that happened during childbirth where a hole was formed in the perineal tissue (between the vagina and anus) that caused women to lose control of their bladder and bowels. Not only were women who suffered from fistulas physically miserable, they were also socially shunned. What made these surgeries particularly controversial was his insistence on not giving his patients anesthesia. Controversy aside, these experiments did lead him to develop the cure for fistulas, which involved sewing up the gaping wound with silver sutures, an improvement over the ineffective silk sutures which were not sterile, so they decomposed and caused infections. Because germ

---

[30] J. Marion Sims, *The Story of My Life* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1968), 100-118. Harris, 18-21.

[31] In the 1970s, feminist historians became especially critical of Sims. Historian Mary Daly lambasted him, arguing that "Sexual surgery became The Man's means of restraining women. J. Marion Sims, known for his hatred and abhorrence of female organs, remedied his problems by ruthlessly cutting up women's bodies." (Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 224-228); See, Duffin, *History of Medicine*, 261; Deborah Kuhn McGregor, *Sexual Surgery and the Origins of Gynecology: J. Marion Sims, His Hospital, and His Patients* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989), 55-81. Todd L. Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (August 1982), 331-348.

theory had not been discovered, physicians did not understand the importance of sterilization. His discovery of the vesico-vaginal fistula cure earned him worldwide fame.[32]

But Sims was a restless man, and he got bored with treating women for fistulas, so he aimed to cure a more varied assortment of "female troubles." Being highly religious, Sims believed that a woman's job was to bear children. And being a surgeon by training, he thought that surgery was justifiable in pursuit of female fertility. Sterile women came to Sims because they knew he would stop at nothing to cure their infertility. Unlike other doctors, he was not afraid of using drastic surgical methods because he believed that he was serving the larger purpose that God had commanded. He noticed that many patients were coming to his office complaining of pain and spasms during sexual intercourse, a condition that got worse over time, and led to women's vaginas tensing up to the point that no penis could enter. Some women who exhibited these symptoms had not had sex with their husbands for decades or had remained virgins their entire lives. He labeled this disease *vaginismus*, and he published a medical journal article in 1862, where he described the symptoms and proffered the cure. In his words, vaginismus was "an involuntary, spasmodic closure of the mouth of the vagina, attended with such excessive supersensitiveness as to form a complete barrier of coition."[33] The cure involved dilating the vagina with glass dilators that Sims had invented. It was not until a decade later that Sims dilators were made of rubber, even though in the early 1860s, Sims began to recognize the superiority of rubber for dilators, after a doctor made him a dilator from the material.[34] He had been concerned about the safety of glass dilators, as there were multiple cases of them breaking

---

[32] Jacalyn Duffin, *History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 261; McGregor, *Sexual Surgery*, 55-81. Todd L. Savitt, "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation," 331-348.
[33] J. Marion Sims, "Cases of Vaginismus, With the Method of Treatment," in *Chicago Medical Examiner,* June 1862, 3 no. 6, 355.
[34] Sims, *The Story of My Life*, 328-329.

in women's vaginas.[35] By the late 1800s, Sims dilators were made of vulcanized rubber, which was flexible, inflatable (early "pump" sex toys), and safer.[36]

Sims was living in Paris when he identified vaginismus. He had fled America because he had mixed allegiances with the North and the South. He grew up in South Carolina, but had moved his business to New York and founded the nation's first Woman's Hospital there in 1855**.** Although he did have a strong reputation worldwide, the French medical establishment did not agree with his treatment plan for vaginismus, according to historian Peter Cryle. Anticipating Freud, the French believed that vaginismus was a moral problem, the term for a psychological problem in the late 1800s. Since vaginismus was a moral problem, it should not be treated with surgery, they thought. The French doctors argued that "Women suffering from vaginismus generally belonged to a higher sphere of society in which education developed the functions of the nervous system at the expense of physical powers."[37] The French connected vaginismus to other hysteria-type diseases and argued, that like hysteria, vaginismus was "the consequence of an advanced civilization that had feminized society, producing in women dangerously refined and pathological versions of femininity itself."[38]

Very little scholarly literature on vaginismus exists, but the disease should be considered, as the French believed, as a psychological one similar to commonly diagnosed 19th century women' sexual diseases, which included hysteria and chlorosis (aka "green sickness").[39]

---

[35] Augusta Vedin, "A Case of Acquired Artesia of the Vagina, Complicated by Pregnancy," *Medical Record*, 52, no. 14 (October 2, 1897); "The glass plug was now exchanged for a Sims' plug of hard rubber to avoid breaking"(Vedin, 480).
[36] "Superiority of vulcanized caoutchouc over any other substance for the Fabrication of Bougies," *The Cincinnati Lancet and Observer,* March 1864, 7, no. 3, 198.
[37] Peter Cryle, "Vaginismus: A Franco-American Story," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences,*67, no. 1 (2012): 86.
[38] Ibid, 86-87.
[39] The only work exclusively devoted to vaginismus is Cryle's article.

Vaginismus' symptoms and treatments bore similarities to these diseases. Both hysteria and chlorosis were characterized by nervousness as well as muscle spasms. Most scholarly writing on hysteria and chlorosis argues that these diseases were propagated in response to fears about both out-of-control female sexuality and a lack of sexual drive in women.[40] As women entered the workplace, they became a part of public life, stoking fears both about self-sufficient, sexually active young women enticing vulnerable men, as well as fears that young men would prey on them. Industrialization was both blamed for these diseases, and provided the means for a cure, as technologies were marshaled to treat the diseases of women.[41]

Sims admitted that vaginismus might have psychological causes, but he only treated the physical ones because "insofar as gynecology was concerned, Marion Sims tended to look upon the knife not as the last weapon, but as the first."[42] The surgical profession was gaining credibility for the first time, and he was following a larger cultural trend brought upon by "the advent of anesthesia and antisepsis." As surgery became legitimized, many disorders that the medical profession would consider to be psychological in the 21st century began to be thought to have a physical basis in the female body, including nervous diseases that were treated by ovariotomy.[43]

Because he had already established such a strong reputation with his fistula surgery, Sims' identification of a sexual women's disease whose cure involved using vaginal dilators insured

---

[40] See, Carol Groneman, *Nymphomania*: *A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2000); Elizabeth Lunbeck, "Hysteria: the Revolt of the 'Good Girl,'" in Elizabeth Reis ed. *American Sexual Histories* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1890* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Keith Wailoo, *Drawing Blood: Technology and Disease Identity in Twentieth-Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 17 & 20.
[41] Lunbeck, "Hysteria."
[42] Seale Harris*, Woman's Surgeon: A Life Story of J. Marion Sims* (MacMillan: New York, 1950), 160.
[43] Duffin, *History of Medicine*, 259.

that the treatment would enter many American doctors' repertoires.[44] And since he considered infertility to be a dire situation, Sims cure was drastic: surgery to remove the hymen, as well as "incision of the vaginal orifice and subsequent dilation."[45] Sims instructed doctors to give patients the Sims glass dilators as they were healing to stretch the vaginal cavity. Vaginal dilation was a time-consuming process that required wearing dilators for "two hours in the morning, and two or three hours in the evening…until the parts being entirely cured" at which time "the patient may be pronounced competent to fulfil [sic] comfortably and pleasantly the duty of a wife."[46] Notably female sexual satisfaction was not a consideration for Sims; sex for women was simply a "duty" that women performed to please their husbands. A sure sign that vaginismus had been cured was that a woman became pregnant, according to Sims. He had a mechanical view of sex, seeing it as a means to an end, and not an end in and of itself:

> It makes no difference whether the copulative act be performed with great vigor and intense erethism, or whether it be done feebly, quickly, and unsatisfactorily, providing the semen be deposited at the mouth of the womb, everything else being as we would have it.[47]

Given this attitude, it is not terribly surprising that if women refused surgery or if surgery and dilation did not work, Sims suggested that the husband have sex with his wife while she was under the influence of ether. Sims never questioned the propriety of rendering a woman unconscious so that her husband could have sex with her, but he reported that patients of other doctors did, citing a husband and wife who practiced this method frequently, and who decided to quit doing it because they thought it was unhealthy.[48] Sims advocated the use of anesthesia during sex, but not during painful vesicovaginal operations.

---

[44] Dilators were used to treat other female conditions such as uterine ailments.
[45] Sims, "Cases of Vaginismus, 355.
[46] Ibid.
[47] McGregor*, Sexual Surgery*, 271.
[48] Ibid., 270-271.

Ironically, Sims, who was indifferent to women's sexual pleasure, ended up popularizing a medical device that doubled as a masturbatory aid for women. Perhaps it is to be expected, considering that his lack of interest in women's sexual pleasure blinded him to the masturbatory possibilities inherent in phallic devices. His general attitude about female sexual pleasure led to dilators being defined as medical aids to male sexual performance and procreation, which allowed companies to escape obscenity prosecutions.

The diagnosis of vaginismus was self-serving for Sims, as he most likely profited by his suggested cure. He had patented his own glass dilators, which he widely promoted through articles in medical journals. There is very little documentation of whether doctors profited from their physician-branded instruments, probably because physicians were afraid of being thought of as hucksters. But judging by how often Sims and other doctors promoted the devices that bore their names, it is clear that they had something to gain.[49]

Sims' dilation cure fit into the trend of using medical technology to treat sexual diseases, as in the late 19th century the hemocytometer was used to treat chlorosis.[50] Vaginismus was not the only disease whose cure was dilation. Following in Sims' footsteps was a British physician who coined the term dyspareunia in 1875 to describe a condition where sexual intercourse was painful for a woman. It was very similar to vaginismus except that it did not involve vaginal spasms, and intercourse was usually possible, just painful. Like Sims, Barnes also had his own line of dilators to treat the problem.[51]

---

[49] Audrey B. Davis, "American Medicine in the Gilded Age: The First Technological Era," *Annals of Science,* 47, no. 2 (1990), 124.
[50] Hartvig Nissen, *A Manual of instruction for giving Swedish movement and massage* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Publisher, 1889), 60-61,
[51] Robert Barnes, *A Clinical History of the Medical and Surgical Diseases of Women* (London: J& A Churchill, 1873), 104; Noyes Bros. & Cutler Catalog, circa late 1800s, St. Paul, Minn. : Noyes Bros. & Cutler, 414.

Vaginismus and dyspareunia were treated as serious diseases because they threatened the success of heterosexual marriages. An inability to have sex could lead to marital unhappiness, childlessness, and possibly even divorce, which was considered reputation destroying at the time, doctors thought. To be granted a divorce, a spouse had to prove that their partner was at fault. Divorces would be granted to husbands if their wives were incapable of having sex and vice versa.[52] Vaginismus was even mentioned in some legal books as grounds for divorce.[53]

The disease of vaginismus reveals the contradictions inherent in women's sexual roles at the time. Marriage manuals argued that women were supposed to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs, but they also made clear that women were supposed to control these needs because women were thought to be less sexual than men. Wives were supposed to be both sexually available to their husbands, yet not too available. Even one of the most liberal and controversial marriage manuals of the time, encouraged wives to only experience pleasure within reason, always deferring to their husbands' enjoyment:

> Bear in mind that it is part of your wifely duty to perform pelvic movements during the embrace, riding your husband's organ gently, and, at times, passionately, with various movements, up and down, sideways, and with a semi-rotary movement, resembling the movement of the thread of a screw upon a screw. These movements will add greatly to your own passion and your own pleasure, but they should not be dwelt in thought for this purpose. They should be performed for the express purpose of conferring pleasure upon your husband, and you should carefully study the results of various movements, gently and tenderly performed, upon him.[54]

It is no wonder why diseases like dyspaurenia and vaginismus began to appear in medical literature during the mid-19th century. The pressure being brought to bear on women was showing up in their bodies.

---

[52] D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 79.
[53] Justin Herold, *A Manual of Legal Medicine: For the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine and Law* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1898), 526.
[54] Ida C. Craddock, *The Wedding Night,* pamphlet, (New York: Ida Craddock, 1900), 13.

Vaginal Dilators Spread Through Medicine

After Sims and Barnes coined the terms vaginismus and dyspareunia, the diseases began to appear in many gynecological treatment manuals and ads for dilators populated medical journals, but rarely with accompanying images. In fact most ads for rubber goods in the journals did not feature drawings of the products, only lists of various devices. Images as well as more detailed information on dilators were found in thousand-page-long physicians' catalogs, however.[55] (Fig. 6) In one catalog, thirty different types of dilators were listed, manufactured by nearly as many different companies, attesting to the popularity of this type of device.[56]

Yet in trade journals, rubber dilators were simply listed next to other sexual products, like pessaries and vaginal syringes.[57] An 1869 ad for Bliss & Sharp Surgical Instruments Dealer was typical of the ads that mentioned dilators by name (Most ads just used umbrella terms like "druggist sundries" or "all rubber goods). This four-page ad in *The Chicago Medical Examiner* featured a list of over 100 items from amputating saws to stethoscopes to rectal speculums. The dilators were featured under the heading of "Uterine and Vagina." One set of dilators for purchase contained 12 different sizes, which is an unusually large amount.[58] Occasionally drawings of dilators were shown in ads. One ad for the G. Tiemann and Co. Surgical Instruments Company featured images of dilators, yet left the dilators unnamed, letting the snaking phallic shapes speak for themselves, assigning each of them a letter instead of a moniker, as if naming

---

[55] Price list of physicians' supplies [manufactured by] Chas. Truax & co, 1890, 385-402, 488, & 1011.
[56] Noyes Brothers & Cutler Catalog, circa late 1800s, "Rectal and Anal Instruments," 980-986.
[57] "Price List of Surgical Instruments For Sale by Bliss & Sharp, 144 Lake Street, Chicago, Agents for the Celebrated Surgical Instruments of Geo. Tiemann & Co. And Dealers in Physicians' Goods," advertisement in *Chicago Medical Examiner,* 10, no. 4 (April 1869), 256.
[58] Ibid.

them as vaginal and anal syringes would take them one step too far into the territory of sex toys.[59]

The main type of advertising, however, was in the text of medical journals, where Sims would discuss his methods for treating vaginismus and recommend that doctors use his dilators. In essence, Sims and Barnes used a print version of word-of-mouth advertising to sell their products. Their "advertisements" were articles in legitimate medical journals and textbooks, and therefore their hyperbolic claims were taken seriously. For example in *Uterine Surgery*, Sims claims he "operated on thirty-nine cases of vaginismus, and in every instance with perfect success."[60]

Physicians cited this passage in subsequent articles in medical journals, attempting to increase their status by tying their names to Sims, the distinguished gynecologist. "To this list of successes, in a condition of things calculated to cause much suffering, both moral and physical, I am happy to be able to add my own," said Dr. Joseph Worster in an 1868 article in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences,* "Cases of Vaginismus: treated after the Method of Sims, by Exsection of the Hymen and Meatus Urinarius."[61] Worster's goal was not to promote dilators, and he probably was not being paid by Sims. Worster's motivation was more likely more selfish: he wanted to raise his esteem in the profession. And he used the "halo effect" to do so, linking his treatments with the "brand leader" in vaginismus. Even the title of his article does this. The inevitable effect was that Worster's and others' articles further publicized the disease, which, in

---

[59] Ad for G. Tiemann & Co. Surgical Instruments in *American Druggist*, August, 1885, Advertisements, 57.
[60] James Marion Sims, *Clinical Notes on Uterine Surgery with Special Reference to the Management of the Sterile Condition* (New York: William Wood and Co., 1867), 330.
[61] Joseph Worster, "Cases of Vaginismus: treated after the Method of Sims, by Exsection of the Hymen and Meatus Urinarius," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 112 (October 1868), 427.

turn, led to more doctors becoming aware of it. Doctors wanted to appear as if they were on the cutting edge of medicine, capable of the newest treatments. Many of these articles mentioned dilators as integral to curing the disease, and dilators were given free advertising. For example, in a chapter on the vagina and vulva in the physicians' reference book, *A System of Practical Medicine,* William Pepper and Louis Starr say that "With every mode of treatment or in cases occurring from any cause the [Sims] vaginal dilator is required."[62]

Since this advertising was covert, it did not violate the newly-formed American Medical Association's code of ethics that stated that physicians should not openly advertise their services.[63] The product-placement type advertisements actually made the marketing more persuasive than paid advertisements because the messages were emerging from legitimate sources. Where vaginismus and dyspaurenia were listed, Sims' and Barnes' dilators were soon to follow. Barnes touted both his and Sims' dilators in his medical text as cures for vaginismus and dyspaurenia. This made his arguments for using dilators seem more legitimate and less self-serving.[64]

The promotion of the surgery-and-dilation cure in medical journals conferred on it a legitimacy that even doctors who had determined their patients' vaginismus was primarily psychological would proudly write about using it. For example, one patient's tightening of the vagina disappeared while she was under sedation, yet an operation was performed nonetheless. In an article in the *Chicago Medical Journal,* Dr. N.S. Davis proudly described performing this surgical procedure on a woman who had "the usual sexual desires," but shrank from terror every

---

[62] They say earlier in the article that only the Sims vaginal dilator should be used. Ed. William Pepper & Assisted by Louis Starr, *A System of Practical Medicine* (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers & Co., 1886) 4: 386.
[63] Harris, *Woman's Surgeon,* 132-140.
[64] Barnes, *Diseases of Women,*106.

time her husband tried to have sex with her. He described examining her vagina and "finding no malformation of the parts beyond the entrance of the vagina, except an apparent shortness of the vagina and smallness of the neck of the uterus."

In spite of this finding, he still recommended performing Sims' vaginismus operation on her. When he operated, he made a larger cut the vagina to insure that the penis would fit: "The incisions, when completed, resembled in shape the letter **Y,** and were deep enough to sever the dense, sub-mucous cellular tissue, and the fibers of the sphincter vagina muscle."[65] The patient was instructed to insert dilators in her vagina, gradually increasing the size, for the next three weeks while she was healing from this operation. Once she fully healed, she began having sex with her husband, who sent Dr. Davis a letter telling him that sex was successful, a fact that the wife later confirmed. Her sexual pleasure was never mentioned. As long as intercourse was possible, her vagina was considered to be cured. But not all physicians agreed with Sims' methods. In a journal article, one doctor said that "Sims's operation for vaginismus is a much more bloody one than that given, and seems to me an unnecessary mutilation."[66]

Doctors also prescribed vaginal dilators as a cure in and of themselves, without the necessity of surgery. Therefore, Sims and Barnes benefited from the disease regardless of whether the doctors who followed in their footsteps chose to perform surgery or not. Why doctors chose to perform surgery is unclear. It is likely that some patients actually required surgery, while others definitely did not. Physicians may have feared that relying solely upon rubber dilators as cures could undermine their expertise. Patients could use dilators by themselves, without doctor supervision. Technology has always been a source of anxiety among

---

[65] N.S. Davis, "Clinical Cases from Practice: Vaginismus," *Chicago Medical Examiner,* 9, no. 9 (September 1868), 552.
[66] James C. Wood, *A Text-Book of Gynecology* (Philadelphia: Boericke & Tafel, 1894), 357.

the medical profession, especially sexual technologies because once these technologies become consumer products, patients were able to purchase them and treat themselves without visiting the doctor at all.[67]

Causes and treatments for vaginismus varied depending upon which doctor was dispensing advice. Large penises and hysteria could bring about vaginismus, according to Heywood Smith, in his 1878 book *Practical Gynecology*.[68] The treatment for the hysteric vaginismus sufferer involved exercise, opium, and dilation. He even featured a picture of a Sims' vaginal dilator at the end of his discussion of vaginismus: a perfect advertisement for the device.

Masturbation could cause vaginismus, according to doctor Henry McNaughton-Jones. Instructing female masturbators to cure their condition with rubber dildos is counterintuitive, to say the least.[69] However, it is a testament to how powerful cultural shaping of the meanings of technology can be, to allow a phallus to be classified as women's masturbation cure. In the realm of masturbation cures, dilation was one of the less drastic "cures" of the time. Other treatments included clitoridectomy, a testament to how seriously some doctors took the disease.[70]

In addition to citing masturbation as a cause of vaginismus, doctors also blamed women's fear of sexual intercourse on vaginismus, as well as hypersensitive vulvas and clitorises. An overactive clitoris was one of the most difficult cases to treat, according to physician Alfred Lewis Galabin, because even "dissecting off of the whole of the sensitive mucous membrane"

---

[67] See, Joel D. Howell, "Physicians, Patients, and Medical Technology, *Technology and the Hospital: Transforming Patient Care in the Early Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1-29.
[68] Smith also cited other causes including "fissures of the anus" and prominent hymens.
[69] He also lists thirteen other treatments including horseback riding, taking a soda bath with a speculum in the vagina, and injecting tobacco into the vagina.
[70] Sarah W. Rodriguez, "Rethinking the history of female circumcision and clitoridectomy: American medicine and female sexuality in the late nineteenth century," *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* 63, no. 3 (2008): 323-47.

could not effect a cure.[71] Other doctors suggested that lubricating the vaginal canal could provide a solution.

Most physicians who wrote about vaginismus followed Sims' party line and ignored the importance of women's sexual pleasure. They blamed the condition on the woman, citing either vaginal issues or intractable psychological aversions. Yet not all felt this way. Some pinned the problem directly on women's male sexual partners:

> I do not believe that vaginismus is due to any narrowness of the organs, but rather to a feeling of fear at the introduction, which prevents dilation…For this there are sometimes reasons, as when men are devoid of the delicacy and preliminary attentions, perhaps devoid of all tact, and who seek to enter without knocking at the door…Vaginismus is often caused by the brutality and clumsiness of the husband.[72]

Asking husbands to "knock on the door" before entering was not a popular mode of treatment for vaginismus. A diagnosis like this was bound to be marginal for a number of reasons. One, most doctors did not think that giving women sexual pleasure was an important goal of intercourse, and some doctors even doubted that women experienced sexual pleasure. Two, it was a critique of male sexual technique, which was an attack on masculinity and would not have been welcomed. Three, this treatment did not involve medical technology and did not require physician expertise, so doctors might have believed that it would undermine their authority to suggest it. Although blaming men for women's lack of interest in sex was less common, it was not unheard of during the time. One school of thought argued that it was a man's duty to awaken the sexuality in their wives, and if the wife was not sexual he was at fault.[73]

---

[71] Alfred Lewis Galabin, *A Handbook of the Diseases of Women* (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, 1882) 358.
[72] "Vaginismus," *Periscope,* March 27, 1875, 251.
[73] D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters,* 78.

Rectal Dilators

Although many doctors were loathe to criticize male sexual technique, they did not ignore men's sexuality altogether. Appearing around the same time as their vaginal counterparts, rectal dilators were marketed to both men and women and showed up in medical catalogs (Fig. 7) and in ads in consumer health magazines. Companies constructed convoluted theories that justified their use, claiming that even healthy patients needed to regularly tone and flex their sphincter muscles. Ads for rectal dilators featured images of the devices, a change from the text-only vaginal dilator ads. This is surprising given the phallic shape of the devices, but companies must have believed that because the target market for rectal dilators was men, the devices would be less controversial.

One of the most widely advertised rectal dilators was the one created by the Young's Rubber Company. Patented by Dr. F.E. Young on May 7, 1892, the dilators were marketed to consumers and physicians to treat a range of conditions from the expected rectal diseases like hemorrhoids to diseases seemingly unrelated to the rectum, like asthma. Sold in a kit of four gradually increasing sizes, the Young's Rectal Dilators were unmistakably phallic black rubber tubes (Fig. 8). The top of the dilator was a thick rubber triangle that looked like the head of a penis as designed by a 19th-century futurist. The bottom featured a flared base with a handle, so the treatments could be self-administered, and the dilator would stay in place thanks to a natural contraction of the sphincter muscles (Fig. 9). In an effort to broaden the market for their dilators, the Young's company claimed that dilators should be used on malnourished patients, "even if there is no disease of the rectum present," "before operations," and "in all non-operative cases of

chronic disease."[74] These anal dilators look identical to 21st century "butt plugs" that are sold as sex toys (Fig. 9 & 10).

In an attempt to both market his dilators and justify their medical necessity, Dr. Young started a journal, *The New Way*, to promote his theory of orificial irritation, a theory that posited that the cause of most health problems was located in the rectum. This was the logic behind his rectum-centric reasoning:

> If the rectum controls the sympathetic nervous system which regulates the actions of the heart, stomach, bowels, liver, kidneys, the caliber of all the blood vessels, the circulation of the blood and the vitality of the whole body, then it is of more importance that it should be in a healthy condition than any other organ of the body. But the fact is that but very few people, and none who are afflicted with chronic diseases, have a healthy and natural rectum.[75]

Orificialism was an emerging medical field in the late 1900s, with a sketchy reputation, as any philosophy centered in the anus was sure to be. In addition to Young, another upstart doctor with his own line of dilators promoted this philosophy. His name was Dr. Edwin Hartley Pratt, and he edited *The Journal of Orificial Surgery.* A sign of orificial surgery's poor reputation in the medical world can be seen in an article in an 1898 issue of the journal. Entitled "Some Don'ts in Orificial Work," the article began with this sentence: "Don't condemn the orificial philosophy before you know anything about it," and it also warned doctors not to "over-dilate" their patients.[76] No justification was given for the latter directive. Most orificial philosophy traced all diseases to the genitals or the anus. Dilation was actually the least invasive cure suggested. Like Sims, many doctors operated on patients' orifices. Since practitioners of this

---

[74] "Young's Hard Rubber Rectal Dilators" ad in *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases.* 1, no. 5 (April 1893), 6 (advertising section).
[75] "How Orificial Irritation Becomes the Predisposing Cause of All Forms of Chronic Disease," *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases,* 1, no. 5 (September 1893), 117.
[76] "Some Don'ts in Orificial Work," *Journal of Orificial Surgery,* 6, No. 7 (1898), 293.

philosophy believed that the sphincter was the locus of disease, it was not a big stretch for them to recommend that melancholia (depression) be treated by a "slit operation on the rectum."[77]

In *The New Way,* Young told physicians that his dilators could be used as sleep aids for patients because inserting a rubber plug into the rectum calmed the nerves (Fig. 11). He did not elaborate on what this meant, but his dilators were designed in a way that stimulated male patients' prostates, so it is possible that patients masturbated while using them before bedtime, and then fell asleep from the soporific effects of self-pleasure. Later he informs doctors that their patients should not be too hasty in increasing the size of the dilators: "The patient should … not time himself to see how large a size he can use."[78] Even though he claimed that his dilators calmed the nerves, he did remark that using "too large" a dilator or using them too often could "excite the nerves."[79] He never overtly mentioned that using dilators could lead to masturbation. In fact, like Sims, he argued the opposite: that dilators, in conjunction with his urethral tubes, could cure masturbation because "the cause of masturbation and sexual excess is orificial irritation."[80] Youthful masturbation led to impotence later in life, Young argued. So first the patients had to treat the irritation and then insert his hard rubber meatus tubes into the urethra to enlarge it. He took great pride in these cures: "To be able to perform the work and restore these sexual wrecks of humanity to a life of happiness is a great and lasting satisfaction."[81]

Although some doctors were swayed by Young's advertisements, convinced that a rectal dilator could cure their patients' headaches, some physicians were more skeptical, and clearly saw the sexual uses of the devices. The editors of an 1893 edition of the *Medical Review* journal

---

[77] "Report of Cases," *Journal of Orificial Surgery,* 6, No. 12 (1898), 532.
[78] Ibid, 137.
[79] Ibid.
[80] "Time and Tonics in Sexual Weakness", *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases* 1, no. 5 (April 1893), 131.
[81] Ibid.

were not impressed by either his theory that the rectum was the nerve center of the human body or that his dilators could cure all ailments, and in a style that was uncharacteristic of the journal, openly mocked Young's argument that anal dilation could cure mental illness:

> We particularly note the power of rectal dilation to cure insanity, as we are assured that at least 'three-fourths of all the maniacs' of the world may be wholly cured 'in a few weeks' time by the application of orificial methods.' Why then do these men not apply the dilators to himself or to each other?...Kraft Ebing [sic] may have a new chapter to write concerning sodomic perversion in his work upon sexual psychopathy.[82]

This article shows that some physicians publicly recognized the sexual nature of rectal dilators and the ability of them to mimic anal intercourse. Others bought into Young's rhetoric with gusto, claiming that rectal dilators were "more invigorating than stimulants" and could save a person from drowning. How the latter worked was never made clear.[83] But far fewer physicians recommended Young's dilators by name as they did Sims' and Barnes'. Although like Sims and Barnes, Young created a disease and manufactured the cure for it, he lacked legitimacy with the medical establishment so this technique was not as effective. This is probably why Young quickly shifted his marketing from doctors to consumers, the latter being more apt to believe outlandish theories like the rectum being the central barometer of health.

However, there were a few legitimate medical journals that recommended using rectal dilators in the doctor's office. To treat "stricture of the rectum" (a narrowing of the rectal canal), one doctor even fashioned a makeshift dilator from whalebone covered in four to six rubber condoms. His patient, Mrs. F, modified his invention by covering the whole device in a silk bag. This rubber-silk-whalebone device was so pleasurable to her that she began to use it every day, even though her husband told her to only use it "once every three or four days only" and her

---

[82] "The New Way," *Medical Review* 27, no. 19 (May 1893), 396.
[83] Joseph McDowell Matthews, "Anal Dilation," *Matthew's Medical Quarterly* 1 (1894), 11.

doctor told her to only use it once "every two or three weeks."[84] It is possible that she was masturbating with the dilator, and the fact that it was covered in multiple condoms only aided to its sexual aura.[85]

Conclusion

The story of the rubber dildo in America begins with the medical industry. Like other sexual products, it started its life as a medical device. Sims conceived of rubber vaginal dilators as devices that ultimately enhanced men's sexual pleasure by allowing men to be able to have sex with their wives. He seemed to be blind to the masturbatory uses of the *dilator* because he did not consider women's sexual pleasure to have importance. Others latched onto this meaning of the device because of his status as an eminent physician. Another way that rubber phalluses were able to be conceived of as clinical devices was through a renaming. The *dildo* is obscene, but the *dilator* is an essential medical tool. Coining diseases that the dilator could treat was another way of creating a medical justification for a rubber phallus or anal stimulator.

However, it is important not to overestimate the sexual uses of rubber dilators as they were dual-use devices. It is impossible to know if patients used rubber dilators to masturbate, as patients would not have kept records of masturbatory uses. Yet, physicians did record the non-sexual uses of dilators. And at least one doctor felt that rectal dilators were sexual devices. In the

---

[84] Wm R. Whitehead, "Cases of Strictures of the Rectum Treated by Different Methods; one of them by Electrolysis," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences,* 64, no. 127 (July 1872), 114. Whitehead also suggested treating this condition with "smooth and slightly conical plugs, about two inches long, made of maple wood, each with a handle, and also with a flange, to prevent it from slipping too far into the rectum. These plugs should be graduated in size, from that of the finger to that of the largest bougie." (114)

[85] Price list of physicians' supplies [manufactured by] Chas. Truax & co, 1890, 1059. Rectal instruments were so popular that even the B.F. Goodrich rubber company produced a version called the Goodrich's Soft Rubber Bougie. It was a long tube that tapered to end in a smaller point. In catalogs it was displayed folded like on itself, to show its flexibility, giving it the appearance of a baby eel.

next few decades the connotation of *dilator* came to be *dildo* among some companies who sold vaginal dilators in 1930s rubber goods catalogs alongside condoms and French ticklers. In fact, in the 21st century, vaginal dilators are also known as "medical dildos."[86]

Doctors invented diseases, and then promoted their own brands of dilators as cures. The more legitimate the physician, the subtler the marketing could be. Sims and Barnes could tout their own dilators and each others' in medical journals without appearing self-aggrandizing. But when Young did the same thing his colleagues openly mocked him. Physicians, in essence, turned themselves into brands, placing their names on medical instruments sold in America and Britain.

In mid-19th century America, the rubber industry, with the help of physicians, branded a phallic devices as high-tech medical treatments. But rubber dildos did not languish in the medical industry for long. Once the mass-produced rubber dilator escaped from its medical confines and entered the hands of the general public, vice societies took notice. In the next chapter, I will explore how another medical device, the vaginal syringe, was reclassified as a dildo by postal inspectors looking to clean up public morality. In the fourth chapter I will return to the rubber phallus, showing how it became threatening when it was rebranded an *immoral rubber device* by vice inspectors.

---

[86]Debby Herbenick & Vanessa Schick*, Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 80; One current mode of treatment involves gradually increasing the size of the dilator until climaxing with "a more realistic appearing dildo."

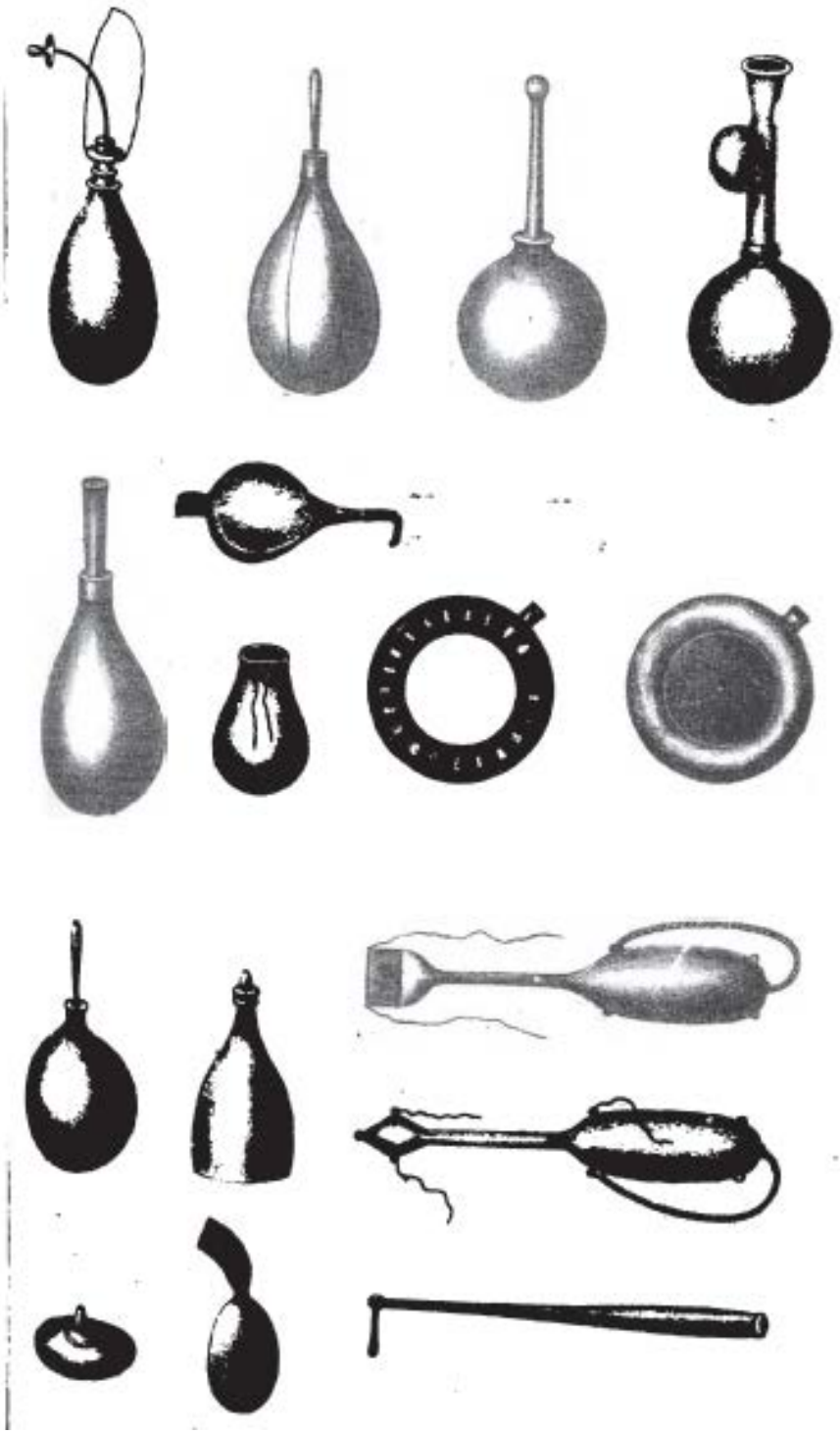


Figure 1: Goodyear's Sketches of Rubber Uses,1853 Charles Goodyear, *Gum-Elastic and Its Varieties: with a detailed account of its applications and uses, and of the discovery of vulcanization* (New Haven: Published for the Author, 1853), image between page 172 and 173.

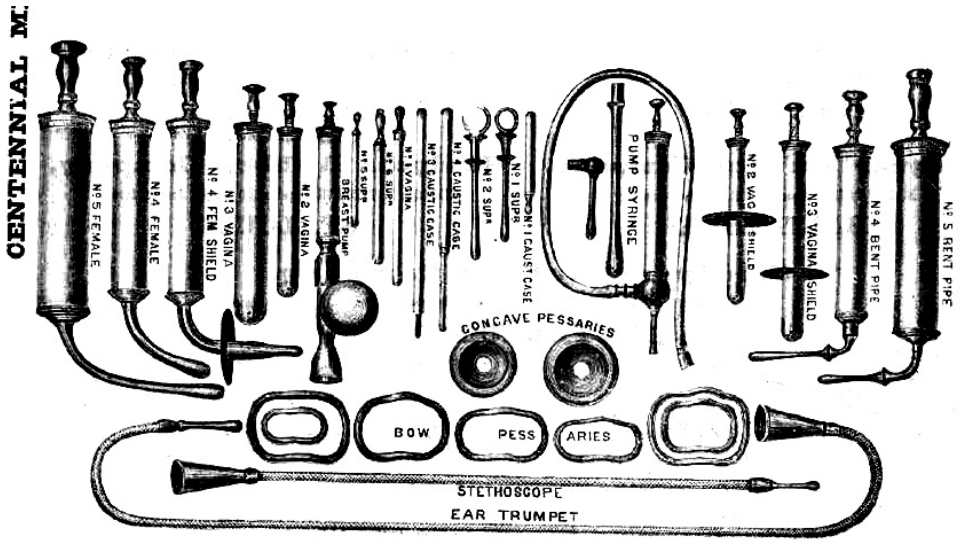
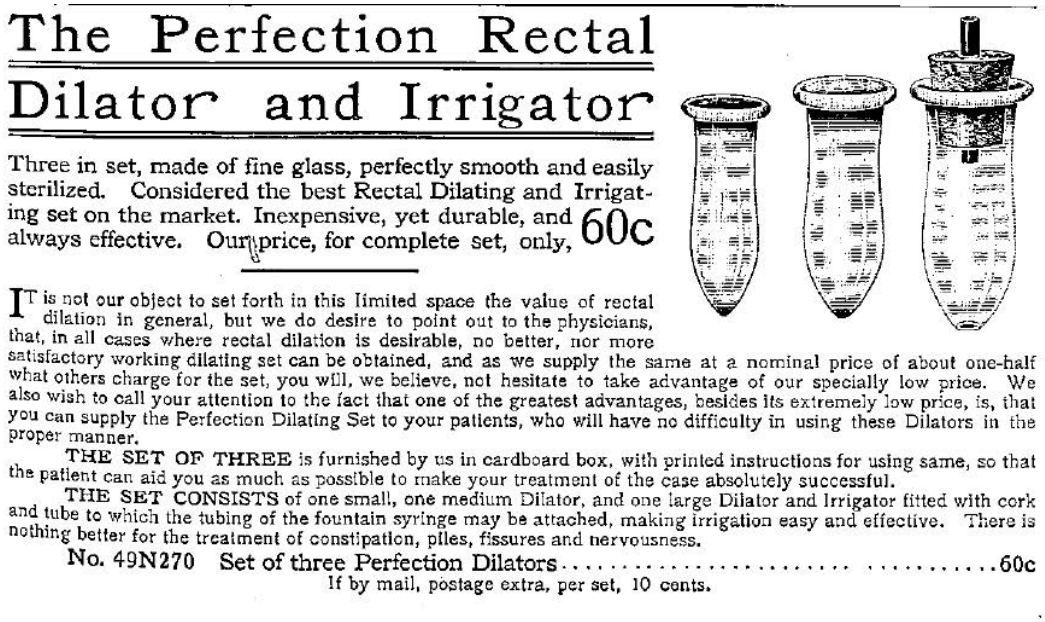


Figure 2: Goodyear Rubber Company Trade Journal 1877 Goodyear Rubber Company Trade Journal No. 4, (Baltimore: Fall 1877), 2. Duke University Library Digital Collections, http:/library.duke.edu/digital collections

Fig. 7784. Sims' Vaginal Dilator, 40c. to 60c. See page 961.

Figure 3: Sims' Dilator, Truax Catalog 1890: Price List of Physicians' Supplies Manufactured by Charles Truax and Company, 5th Edition, (Chicago, 1890), 1011.



The Perfection Rectal Dilator and Irrigator

Three in set, made of fine glass, perfectly smooth and easily sterilized. Considered the best Rectal Dilating and Irrigating set on the market. Inexpensive, yet durable, and always effective. Our price, for complete set, only, **60c**

IT is not our object to set forth in this limited space the value of rectal dilation in general, but we do desire to point out to the physicians, that, in all cases where rectal dilation is desirable, no better, nor more satisfactory working dilating set can be obtained, and as we supply the same at a nominal price of about one-half what others charge for the set, you will, we believe, not hesitate to take advantage of our specially low price. We also wish to call your attention to the fact that one of the greatest advantages, besides its extremely low price, is, that you can supply the Perfection Dilating Set to your patients, who will have no difficulty in using these Dilators in the proper manner.

THE SET OF THREE is furnished by us in cardboard box, with printed instructions for using same, so that the patient can aid you as much as possible to make your treatment of the case absolutely successful.

THE SET CONSISTS of one small, one medium Dilator, and one large Dilator and Irrigator fitted with cork and tube to which the tubing of the fountain syringe may be attached, making irrigation easy and effective. There is nothing better for the treatment of constipation, piles, fissures and nervousness.

No. 49N270 Set of three Perfection Dilators 60c

If by mail, postage extra, per set, 10 cents.

Figure 4: Rectal Dilators in Sears Catalog, 1902 Sears Special Catalogue of Surgical Instruments and Physicians' Supplies, (Chicago: Sears and Roebuck Company, 1902), 11. Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Trade Literature Collection, Washington, D.C.

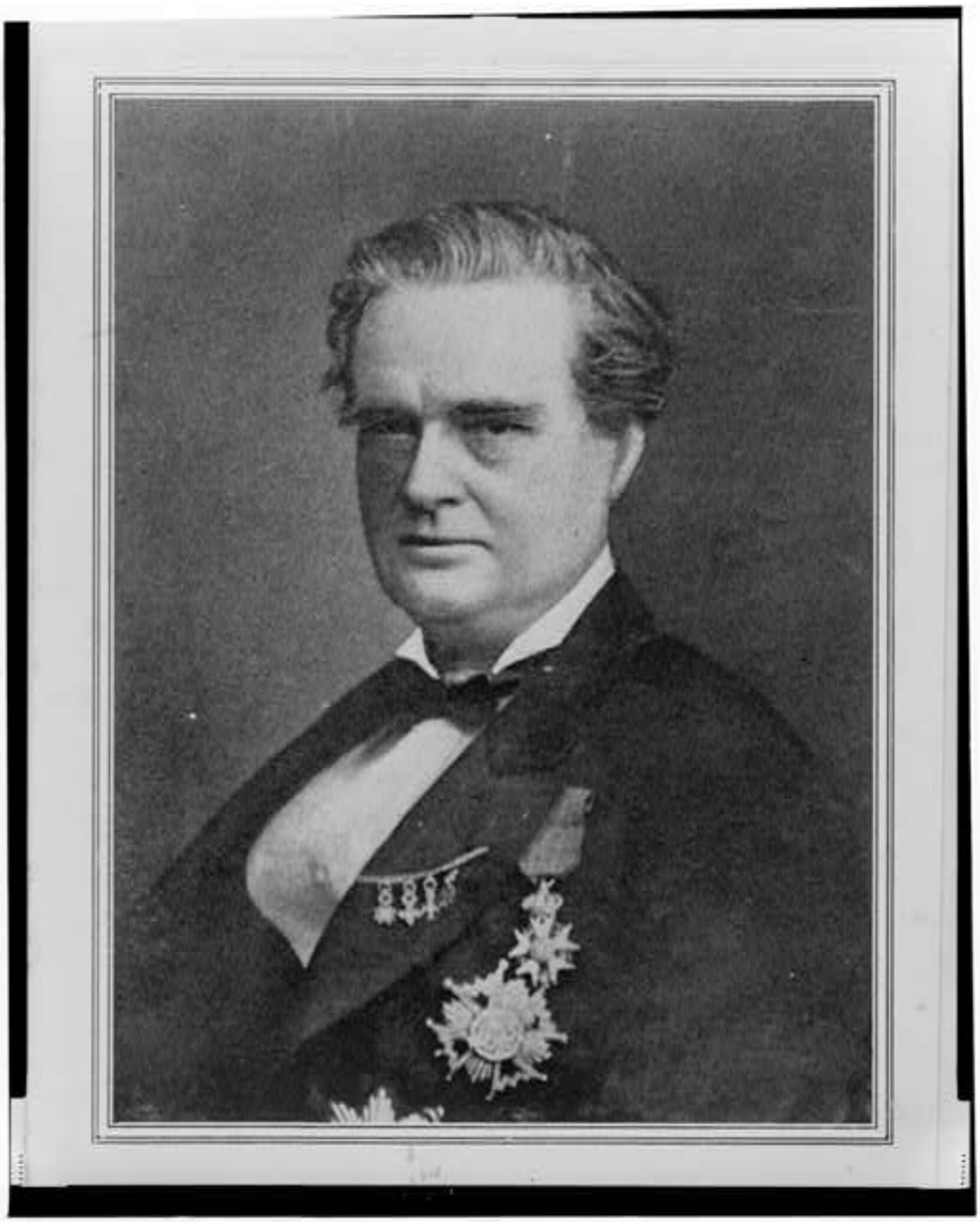


Figure 5: J. Marion Sims, circa 1901 Photograph of James Marion Sims, *Some Eminent American Physicians & Surgeons* (New York: A.R. Elliott Publishing Co., c1901). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.

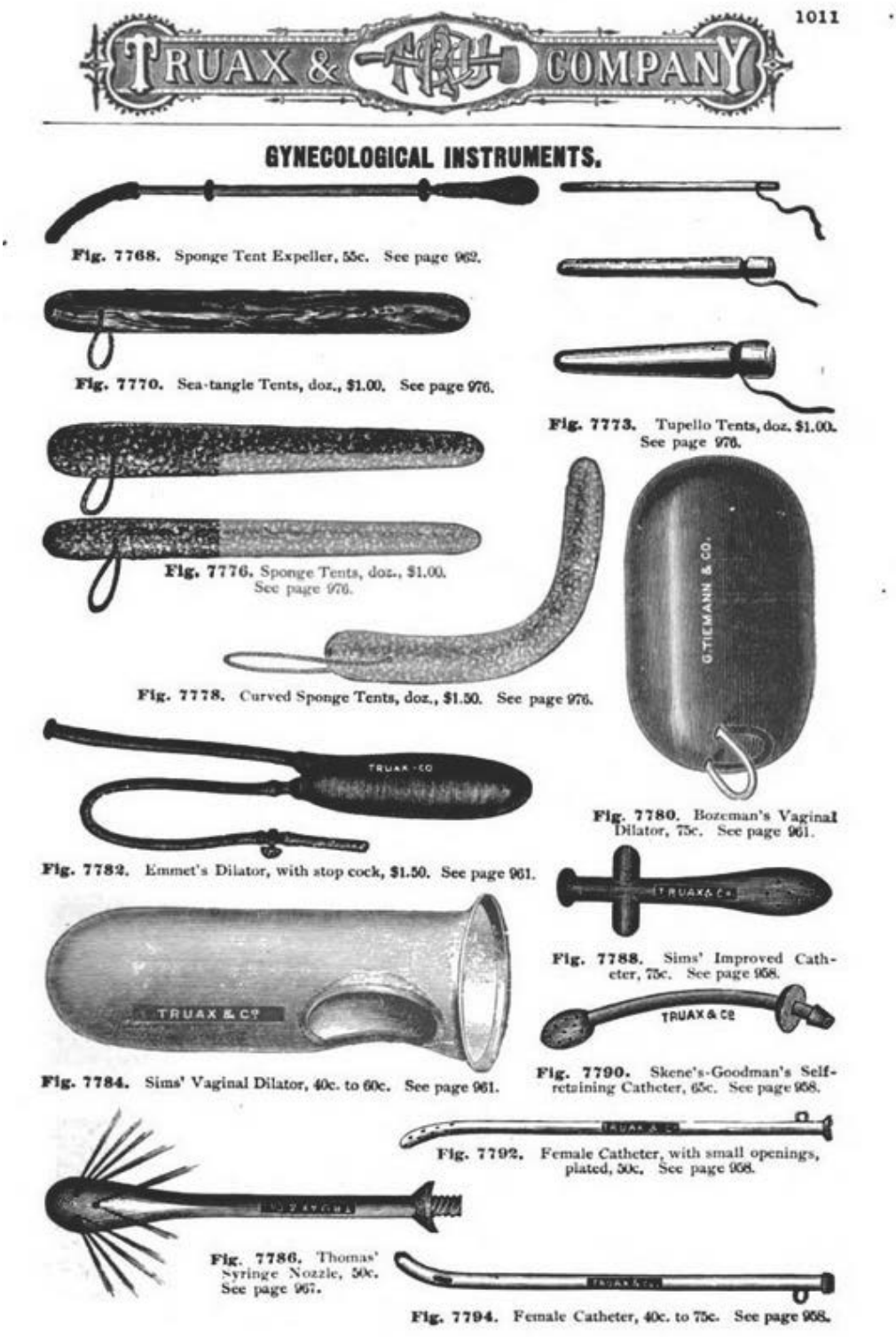
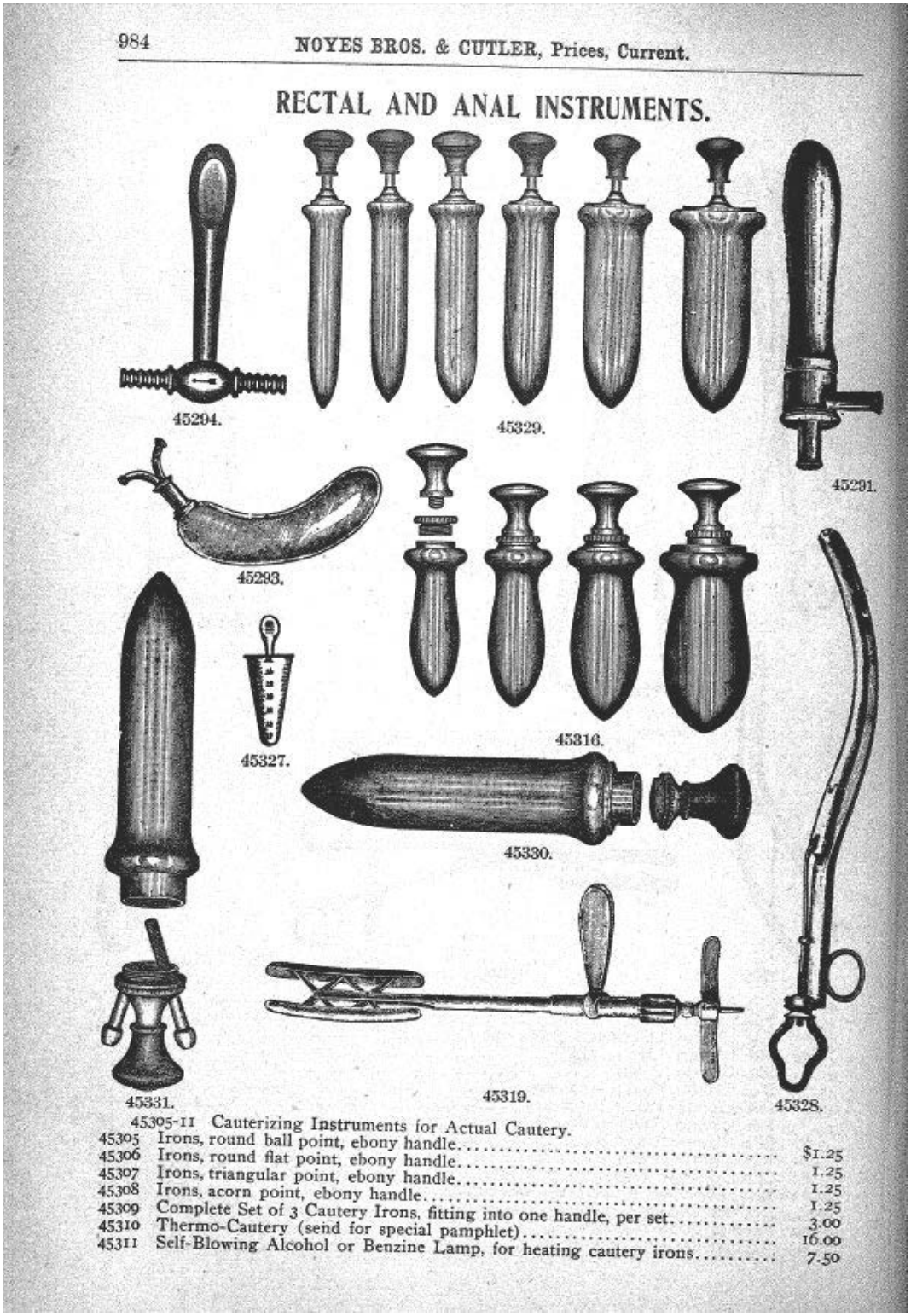


Figure 6: Dilators in Truax Catalog, 1890 Price List of Physicians' Supplies Manufactured by Charles Truax and Company, 5th Edition, (Chicago, 1890), 1011.



984 NOYES BROS. & CUTLER, Prices, Current.

RECTAL AND ANAL INSTRUMENTS.

45294. 45329. 45291. 45293. 45316. 45327. 45330. 45331. 45319. 45328.

45305-11 Cauterizing Instruments for Actual Cautery.

45305	Irons, round ball point, ebony handle	$1.25
45306	Irons, round flat point, ebony handle	1.25
45307	Irons, triangular point, ebony handle	1.25
45308	Irons, acorn point, ebony handle	1.25
45309	Complete Set of 3 Cautery Irons, fitting into one handle, per set	3.00
45310	Thermo-Cautery (send for special pamphlet)	16.00
45311	Self-Blowing Alcohol or Benzine Lamp, for heating cautery irons	7.50

Figure 7: Rectal Dilators in Noyes Bros. & Cutler Catalog, circa late 1800s Trade Catalog from Noyes Bros. and Cutler, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Noyes Brothers and Cutler, c1890s). Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Trade Literature Collection, Washington, D.C.

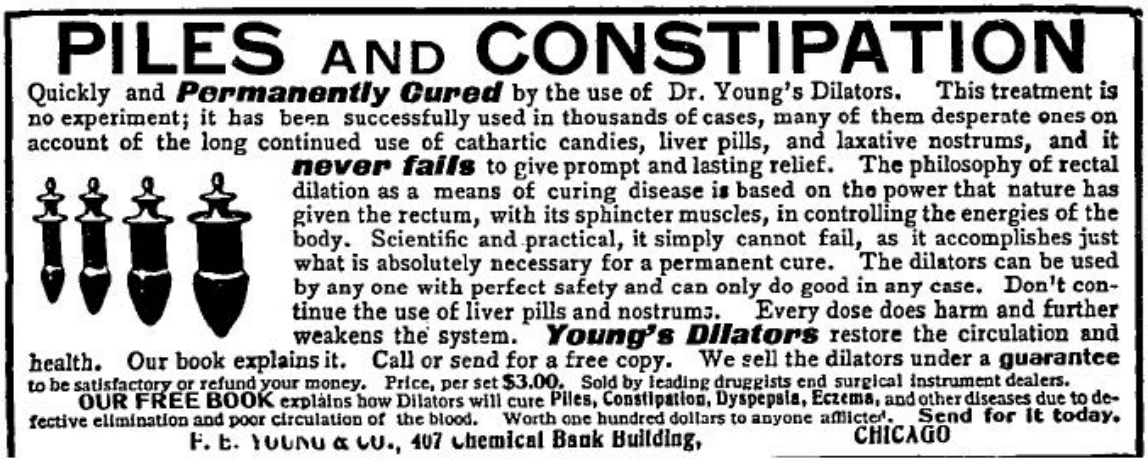


Figure 8: Young's Dilator Ad Health Magazine Dec 1904 Young's Dilator Ad, *Health* no. 54 (Dec 1 1904), 724.

Figure 9: Young's Rubber Dilator, circa early 1900s Artifact held in the Smithsonian Museum of National American History's Division of Medicine and Science, Artifact Collection, circa 1900s, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

Figure 10: Doc Johnson Sasha Grey Signature Plug, 2014 Plug manufactured by Doc Johnson Enterprises, North Hollywood California. Note: Plug is glass, accessed on August 21, 2014, http://www.amazon.com/Johnson-Sasha-Grey-Signature-Plug/dp/B00LJUW7D8

YOUNG'S RECTAL DILATORS.

Fig. 3.]

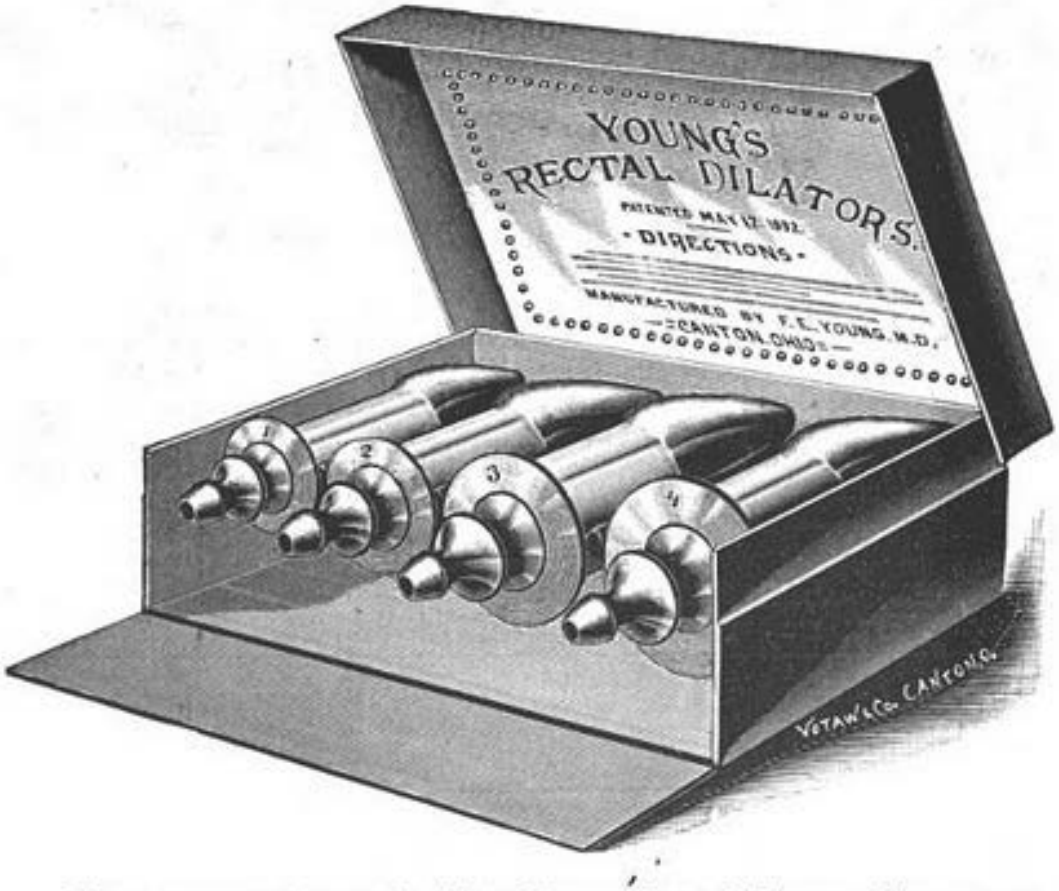


Fig. 3, represents a full set of the Tubular Dilators as displayed in the case. These cases are cloth covered imitation leather, with durable rack, and are handsome and permanent.

All these instruments are now made in Black Hard Rubber, and will be sent post paid on receipt of the following prices: Plain. $4.00. Tubular. $5.00. When ordering state explicitly which style you desire. A pamphlet on the "Philosophy of Dilatation," giving clinical cases of cure and other valuable information, mailed free.

Address all Orders to

DR. F. E. YOUNG,

CANTON, OHIO.

Figure 11: Young's Rectal Dilators Ad, The New Way Journal, 1893 Advertisement for Young's Rectal Dilators, *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases* 1, no. 5 (September 1893), 144.

Chapter 3: The War on Immoral Rubber Goods: Anthony Comstock's Anti-Sex Toy Campaign

On June 19, 1873, Anthony Comstock arrested 21-year-old Goodyear India Rubber Glove Company employee Joseph Kendall for selling a "substitute for a dildoe" on the streets of New York City. Comstock had spotted an advertisement for the device in a local newspaper, and he sent the Goodyear India Rubber Glove Company a decoy letter to determine if, in fact, the rubber article was a dildo. What Comstock received in the mail was a vaginal syringe, which

Goodyear advertised as a vaginal cleansing device for feminine health.[1] But two things about the syringe made it suspect to Comstock: its phallic shape and its supposed contraceptive powers. Both contraceptives and sex aids were illegal in America at the time, making this syringe doubly offensive in the mind of Comstock (to see an example of the type of syringe he was selling, see Fig.1).[2]

Far from being known as a purveyor of sex toys, Goodyear's India Rubber Glove Manufacturing Company (founded in 1844) was well known and highly respected. The Goodyear India Rubber Glove Company was one of the largest suppliers of druggist goods in America in the late 1800s and early 1900s.[3] The arrest of their employees for vice did not stop the company from being featured in a laudatory article published on New Year's Day in 1886 in *The New York Times* that praised the company for having "some of the best talent known to the trade." Although the article did not mention that the company produced sexual aids, they purposely left the nature of their product lines ambiguous, saying, "It's an impossibility to enumerate the almost myriad forms in which rubber is worked in this factory…[The India

---

[1] "Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872, Continued," Ralph Ginzburg Collection, Box 14, Folder 5, Madison, Wisconsin, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
[2] D.R.M. Bennett, *Anthony Comstock: His Career of Cruelty and Crime* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 1031. (Originally published in 1878. The DaCapo version is a reprint).
[3] W.E. Simpson, *Rubber: Its Commercial and Financial Development From the Tree to Payment of Dividends Upon the Capital Invested* (New York: Wall Street Journal, 1900), 16. According to Simpson, "The total business done in hard rubber products in the United States is $2,500,000, of which the American Hard Rubber Company, composed of the India Rubber Comb Company, the Rutland Hard Rubber Company and the Goodrich Hard Rubber Company, control about three-quarters. The Goodyear Vuclanite Company produces about one-fifth of the total output. (40-41)."

Rubber Glove Company] produce[s] a larger variety and quantity of rubber goods than any other like concern."[4]

But Comstock did not hold the company in such high esteem, nor did the Assistant District Attorney who began Kendall's trial with an apology for forcing the jury "to consider things of very great depravity." He told the jury that it was their "duty to consider the law and the evidence, no matter how repulsive it may seem to them…for the sake of justice and in the interest of public decency and morality."[5]

In this chapter I will show the shift in the meaning of the technology of rubber medical devices from being seen as legitimate tools to being perceived of as immoral devices that need to be destroyed. I will detail Anthony Comstock and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice's campaign against the sex-toy industry and show how they attempted to destroy the industry and why they did so.

Kendall's trial provides a microcosm of how Comstock's anti-sex toy campaign worked. Even before Kendall's trial, the process was prejudiced. To find sex-toy dealers, Comstock usually only targeted small-time peddlers who had trouble defending themselves. Then, he entrapped them by sending decoy letters. And when they came to trial, the DAs and judges were gunning against them.[6] The trial hinged on the uses of the vaginal syringe. If it was, in fact, simply used as a vaginal cleansing device it was legal. But if it was used for masturbation or as a contraceptive it was illegal.

---

[4] "India Rubber: How Produced and Used. A Vast and Important Industry," *New York Times,* January, 1, 1886, 5. It is possible that the company had a deal with *The Times* because they did not report on Kendall's arrest, but their rival, *The New York Herald* did.
[5] "Business in the Other Courts: United State Circuit Court. Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail," *New York Herald,* July 2, 1873, 8.
[6] Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 28.

Kendall's trial was just one of many that hinged on the uses of a vaginal syringe, which, like vaginal dilators, were dual-use devices that could be used sexually or non-sexually. Sometimes syringes were put on trial for their purported contraceptive purposes, other times for their masturbatory uses. To beat obscenity charges, companies claimed syringes only had a non-sexual use in court. For example, Comstock arrested newspaper owner and sex radical Ezra Heywood in 1882 for "advertising a vaginal syringe in his newspaper *The Word.*" Heywood had baited Comstock by calling his device "the Comstock syringe for Preventing Conception," because he wanted to create a test case that would eliminate or liberalize the anti-contraception laws. Like Kendall's trial, Heywood's trial relied upon proving "the multiple uses of a vaginal syringe." As historian Andrea Tone says; "There was nothing about the technology of a syringe that made it inherently a preventative, [Heywood] argued." The jury concluded that Heywood was not guilty because they determined that the syringe had non-contraceptive uses, including vaginal cleanliness. "Heywood's acquittal muddled the legal waters, making it significantly harder to indict and convict makers and distributors of contraceptives," said Tone.[7]

Vaginal syringes were widely advertised in both medical and consumer magazines with vague language that hinted at sexuality.[8] Although they were marketed as hygiene devices, vaginal syringes were also used for contraceptive purposes and probably for masturbation. How often the term "Ladies' Syringe" was used in advertisements as a euphemism for dildo is unclear. (Fig 2) The sexualized uses of syringes were only described fully in pornography, where vaginal syringes were used as penis substitutes and referred to as *dildoes.* Postal inspectors sometimes

[7] Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 37-39.
[8] Goodyear Rubber Co. ad in *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health*, December 1894, 98, no. 6, 9.

confiscated the syringes and declared them obscene for their masturbatory and contraceptive uses.[9]

But Kendall's trial occurred nine years before Heywood's trial made convictions more difficult to obtain, so Kendall had to fight an uphill battle. In 1872, vaginal syringes were so taboo that even during trials lawyers and defendants were not able to speak openly about the devices. So determining the syringe's uses was nearly impossible. For example, Kendall's lawyer asked Comstock a question about the vaginal syringe and "This question was at once objected to by the Judge, who speaking in a very stern and determined tone of voice, said, 'One more remark of that kind, sir, and you will be committed. This is a serious case, and must be tried with care.'"[10]

Whether or not a rubber good was immoral was not only unclear to the manufacturers of them, but it was also confounding to the jurors who were forced to weigh the evidence by looking at the devices as well as listening to the testimony of doctors. When Kendall first went to trial in July 3, 1873, there was a hung jury. Since there was always a way to argue that a masturbatory article had hygienic uses, it was difficult to declare them one hundred percent

---

[9] 1875 Arrest Reports for the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Morris Bass, 128 2nd St., NYC, importer of rubber goods. Among items seized: 6 dozen ticklers, 200 dozen condums, 12 Womb veils, 70 obscene microscopic charms, 2 vaginal syringes. And dildoes." Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 4, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin; Henry Spencer Ashbee, *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature Index Librorum Prohibitorum: being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono- graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books (*London: privately printed, 1877), 3:192.

[10] "Business in the Other Courts: United State Circuit Court. Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail," *New York Herald,* July 2, 1873, 8.

immoral.[11] Kendall's pseudonym of Mrs. Wood, however, may have given them an indication of the intended use of his syringe.[12]

The hung jury angered Comstock so much that after the trial, Comstock marched down the stairs of the courthouse and punched the doctor who had defended the syringe. In response the doctor swung his cane at Comstock, hitting him squarely in the forehead and causing him to bleed.[13] On January 6, 1874, Kendall was tried again. Once again, doctors testified that his rubber article was not indecent or immoral. Comstock was more prepared this time, and he countered with his own testimony, bringing forth of a set of doctors who claimed that the syringe was "condemned by physicians of the highest standing in New York and Brooklyn."[14] It took the jury only ten minutes to declare Kendall guilty.[15]

Later advertisements do not belie company's status as sellers of sex toys, probably due to their fear of prosecution. A Goodyear India Rubber Glove Company ad from 1886 (Fig. 2) is typical of the vague notices that ran in more respectable papers. By using the phrase "Rubber Goods of every description," they were indicating to consumers that they carried any imaginable device, including condoms and dildos (disguised as vaginal syringes). Presumably some of their catalogues contained images of vaginal syringes and condoms, but an illustrated catalog from 1886 only shows their collection of boots and shoes.[16]

---

[11] "Business in the Other Courts: United State Circuit Court. Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail," *New York Herald*, July 4, 1873, 6.
[12] "The Kendall Case," *Commercial Advertiser*, July 3, 1873, 4.
[13] "Detective Comstock Assaulted," *New York Herald,* July 3, 1873, 5.
[14] Anthony Comstock, *Frauds Exposed: Or How People Are Deceived, Robbed, And Youths Corrupted* (New York: J.H. Brown, 1880), 404.
[15] "Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail: Before Judge Benedict and a Jury," *New York Herald Tribune,* January 6, 1874, 9.
[16] Their catalogs with sex toys in them have either not been archived, or it is possible that Comstock destroyed most of them. Andrea Tone says that "in the early 1870s, condoms, douching syringes and solutions…could be purchased from mail-order houses, wholesale drug-

Not everyone felt that rubber vaginal syringes should be illegal. The Liberal League publicly protested the arrest of a different "well-meaning dealer" of female syringes in their 1876 petition to get the Comstock Act repealed:[17]

> It was proved in court that the instrument was an excellent one, that it was useful, etc., but because under the law it was adapted to, or capable of being used for, an immoral purpose, the poor man had to suffer two years' imprisonment, his business destroyed, and his reputation blackened for life.[18]

Kendall ended up being convicted and sentenced to pay a $250 fine. Since he did not have the money, he was thrown in jail where he spent 60 days. This was a light sentence because the maximum penalty was a $100 to $5,000 fine or one to 10 years of hard labor or both. He was just one of hundreds of men who were arrested for selling sex toys on the streets of New York. These men's stories have been mainly lost to history, as has the narrative of the American sex-toy trade in the late 1800s and early 1900s.[19]

Why Vice Societies Disliked Sex Toys

Why Comstock went after Kendall and a host of other sex toy manufacturers is a complicated story. Dildoes and masturbatory articles riled the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice because they believed that masturbation was dangerous and non-procreative sex was a sin. The NYSSV's opposition to contraception and prostitution has been widely

---

supply houses, pharmacies, and dry-goods and rubber vendors…vendors of condoms and diaphragms also sold other rubber articles like dildos. *Devices and Desires,* 14. "Illustrated Catalogue of the India Rubber Glove Company's Boots and Shoes," (Boston: Lamkin Foster Agents,1885-1886).

[17] This dealer was probably not Kendall, since Kendall's sentence was for only 60 days. Comstock, *Frauds Exposed*, 395-396.

[18] Reprint of Liberal League's petition "To the Publishers, Booksellers, Editors, Importers, Druggists, Artists, Physicians, and the Lovers of Liberty and Justice in the United States," in Comstock, *Frauds Exposed*, 399-400.

[19] "Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872, Continued," Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 5. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Madison, Wisconsin.

documented, but their distaste for sex toys has rarely been remarked upon. Most historians who write about Comstock have focused on his seizures of erotic books and contraceptives, probably because these seizures were highly publicized and because there is a large literature on contraceptives and free speech to draw on. However, Comstock did spend a significant amount of time chasing down the manufacturers of sexual aids. Historians have mentioned sex toy destruction only as a footnote to Comstock's campaign. Both Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (2002) and Donna Dennis (2009) mention his campaign against masturbatory articles in passing.[20] Most historians do not even give it a mention (see Fig. 3 for a picture of Comstock and Fig. 4 for a picture of the NYSSV's logo).[21]

A few plausible reasons exist for the exclusion of the sex-toy story from the Comstock narrative. One, the Society itself found sex toys so horrifying that they rarely mentioned them by name. "Too gross to be described," Comstock says in a published vice report from 1882 in reference to *immoral rubber goods*.[22] Two, the stakes of the sex-toy industry seem less high than those of the birth-control industry where pioneers like Margaret Sanger were literally dealing with life-or-death situations. But the arrest of sex-toy manufacturers caused bankruptcies, destroyed reputations, and led to a constant state of anxiety among rubber company owners whose products and advertisements were scrutinized by vice reformers on a daily basis. Many of

---

[20] Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 167-170. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 370, 375 and 376;

[21] Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America From the Gilded Age to the Computer Age, 2nd ed.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

[22] D.R.M. Bennett, *Anthony Comstock: His Career of Cruelty and Crime* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 1052. (Originally published in 1878. The DaCapo version is a reprint).

the women's organizations that were upset about the Comstock Act were birth-control societies who requested that the anti-obscenity laws remove "from this law the words 'for the prevention of conception.'" However, the words "for self-abuse" (a euphemism for masturbation), which the law also contained were of no concern to them.[23]

Three, the sex-toy narrative doesn't have any clear protagonists and villains. The story of contraception has martyrs like abortionist Madame Restell who killed herself after being pursued by Comstock, while the anti-prostitution campaign has the theatrics of preachers who belted out admonitory sermons to the male patrons strolling in front of the brothels. But in a society where even the censors shied away from describing the very things they were condemning it was difficult for a hero emerge from the sea of vulcanized rubber phalluses.

Four, few sources exist. Comstock's war against sex toys got less press than his war against art and literature, which are more socially acceptable to defend. Nineteenth-century free-speech activists felt no shame in publishing articles arguing that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* should not be banned because it possessed literary value. But they never defended the right of a woman to have her clitoris stimulated by a French tickler because it does not have the same cache to it as championing her rights to gaze at a Botticelli. The sex toy is too closely connected to bodily processes to have any cultural status. And companies that produced sex toys did not have detailed records because they had to hide their activities from the censors. Comstock rarely went after large, well-regarded companies that sold contraceptives or sex toys, including B.F. Goodrich and the Sears and Roebuck Company. B.F. Goodrich manufactured seven different models of phallic anal and vaginal syringes, but Goodrich was not attacked as the smaller India

[23] "Mothers First! Massachusetts Law Relating to Crimes Against Chastity: Chapter 212, Section 26." Ralph Ginzburg Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

Rubber Glove Company was.[24] Similarly, the Colgate Company marketed Vaseline as a contraceptive, but since Samuel Colgate was the President of the NYSSV (from 1873-1898), his company's contraceptive devices were ignored.[25]

Comstock's campaign against the rubber industry shaped the marketing and promotional strategies of rubber companies that sold sex toys. Companies changed the names of their sex toys to evade detection; they either invented legal, non-sexual uses for their devices or only promoted the legal uses of dual-use devices; and they shifted production of their products outside of New York, where Comstock was less likely to chase after them. Ambiguity and double entendres permeated advertisements as a way to evade prosecution.[26]

Dildos and other sex toys were visible in the mid and late 1800s when they were disguised as dilators and other health aids, so advertisements for them could populate mainstream newspapers and magazines. But when they were marketed openly as masturbation devices, they were only advertised in racier publications like gentlemen's newspapers. Ads for these devices came upon the scene during "the birth of modern advertising," and their advertisements shaped ads for sex products for decades.[27]

History of The Comstock Act

Fed up with the flourishing sex toy business, Comstock devised a bill that passed Congress in 1873 that specifically outlawed the sale of "masturbatory articles" and "immoral

---

[24] "The B.F. Goodrich Co. Manufacturers of India Rubber and Druggist Sundries,"Selling Agents the Columbia Rubber Works Co. 66 &68 Reade St.: New York, Circa early 1900s), Smithsonian National Museum of American History Warshaw Collection Rubber Box 2, Folder B.F. Goodrich.

[25] Boyer, *Purity in Print,* 6. Tone; *Devices and Desires,* 28-30.

[26] I will provide more detail on dildo marketing, which is the focus of Chapter 4. See also, Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 443.

[27] Tom Reichert, *The Erotic History of Advertising* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003),19-20.

rubber goods." Like all laws in the American legal system, the Comstock Act was based on precedent. And because American obscenity law has its origins in British law, the law was influenced by the 1868 British *Hicklin* case, which judged a book's obscenity on whether any part of the book was obscene, not whether the work as a whole was obscene.[28] A book was only declared obscene if "the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall." Children were believed to be especially susceptible.[29]

Even though its origins were in Britain, American law also influenced the Comstock Act, which was roughly based on an 1865 New York state postal law, a portion of which was aimed at eliminating obscenity in the mails. This postal law was a reaction to the daguerreotype process, which led to photographs being cheap and easily reproducible, and the unintentional result of the 1845 postal act that reduced the cost of mailing letters, which increased the circulation of pictures of scantily clad women and racy French postcards. These were sent to soldiers during the Civil War, a fact that Comstock discovered when he was enlisted in the Army. Witnessing this type of depravity among the troops upset Comstock to such an extent that he made it his life's work to eliminate salacious items from the mails.[30] Comstock was not the only reformer who felt this way. In 1865 a senator proposed a bill to remove obscenity from the mail because "It is said that our mails are made the vehicle for the conveyance of great numbers and quantities of obscene books and pictures, which are sent to the Army, and sent here and there and

---

[28] Craig LaMay, "America's Censor: Anthony Comstock and Free Speech," 19 *Communication and the Law,* 1 1997, 14.
[29] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 434.
[30] Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Conflict Over Sex in the United States in the 1870s," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (Sep., 2000), 423.

everywhere." Although the bill did not pass, it shows that "obscene" postcards were a cause for concern among some in the government.[31]

However obscenity was an even greater concern among late 19th century purity organizations. Comstock's belief in the immorality of vice was not unique but his fervor was. In February 1866, the New York YMCA analyzed "the traffic in bad books, prints, and instruments" and determined that they were "a fruitful source of demoralization and crime."[32] The YMCA assumed that no explanation for the causal relationship between sexual publications and devices and crime was needed. They believed that such a connection was self-evident. Children were one of their greatest concerns, so they were particularly upset when they discovered that eleven-year-olds were toiling away in rubber goods factories.[33] Sex-toy companies did expose children to their catalogs, as they sent them to multiple girls' seminaries. One of their principals alerted the NYSSV in 1877, saying "these scoundrels must either think I have a harem, or else are trying to make one of my school."[34] So in the mid-1860s, the leaders of the New York YMCA (an organization that Comstock joined a few years later) lobbied for a stricter state law that did not stop at banning pornography, but also prohibited "indecent or immoral" articles, a category that encompassed sexual aids and contraceptives. In 1868, this law passed, and it became the blueprint for the Comstock law, which adopted both its inclusion of contraceptives and sex aids as obscenity, as well as its search and seizure provision.[35] The Society's ire was not just directed at the sex toys themselves, but it was also directed at the advertisements for them, especially the ones in newspapers that were viewed by the whole family.

---

[31] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 313.
[32] "TO BE DESTROYED WHEN READ. PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL, " Report from the Y.M.C.A. (New York: Jan. 28, 1874), 2.
[33] Ibid, 6.
[34] Comstock, *Frauds Exposed*, 439.
[35] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 362.

To understand the Comstock law, it is essential to understand the man himself. Anthony Comstock was an uneducated dry-goods salesman when he began his one-man anti-obscenity campaign in the early 1870s. According to an apocryphal story, Comstock believed that reading erotica had caused his friend's death. Erotica had led his friend to engage in immoral behavior, Comstock thought. This led Comstock to believe that erotica (pornography as well as sex toys) caused "dangerous" sexual behavior, such as masturbation and frequenting prostitutes. He sought out the man who sold his friend the pornography because he believed that this peddler of obscenity, Conroy, had ruined his friend's life. In his search for Conroy, he discovered an enormous underground network of sex toys and erotica that was flourishing in spite of the current anti-obscenity law. So he began to scour New York City for obscene literature, condoms, and sexual aids, reporting his findings to police who arrested the transgressors.[36]

In 1872, he joined forces with the New York YMCA to eliminate vice in New York City, and helped create the YMCA's Commission for the Suppression of Vice. When in 1872, the Federal Obscenity Act was created (a subset of federal postal law), vice organizations believed that they were beginning to win the battle against obscene literature and devices.[37] The bill made it illegal to send any obscene pamphlets, newspapers, books, or other printed matter through the mail. But when Comstock tried to get publishers prosecuted under this act, he failed.

With the help of a lawyer, he drafted a bill that was stricter and more specific, and lobbied Congress for it. To ensure it would pass, he arrived in Washington armed with what he believed to be foolproof ammunition: an abundance of obscene rubber goods and pornography that he had collected while working as a vice reformer at the YMCA. Apparently this technique

---

[36] Ibid., 369.
[37] LaMay, "America's Censor," 14.

worked and lawmakers were so upset by the mountains of dildos, condoms, and French ticklers that they passed the law.[38]

Passed in 1873, this bill, known as the Comstock Act, made it illegal to mail any:

> obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, advertisement, circular, print, picture drawing, or other representation, figure, or any cast, instrument, or other article of an immoral nature, or any drug or medicine, or any article whatever for the prevention of conception, or for causing unlawful abortion, or shall advertise the same for sale… or shall manufacture…any of such articles shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor.[39]

Comstock's law expanded the national obscenity law to include contraceptives and sexual aids, called "immoral articles," as well as advertisements for them, which showed that he was particularly concerned with the effects of sexual aids on the American population. He was responding to the huge, brazen, public trade in sexual products that flourished in New York City. In addition to being instrumental in getting this law passed, he was also given the position of special agent in the United States Post Office "with power to confiscate immoral matter in the mails and arrest those sending it" and appointed secretary to the NYSSV, where he was given free reign to indulge his ardent dislike for obscene literature, advertisements, and sexual products.[40]

This bill reshaped the sex toy industry. Companies continued to sell vaginal syringes and dildos after 1873, but they had to alter their marketing techniques. A year later, Comstock had seized "60,300 articles made of rubber for immoral purposes, and used by both sexes."[41]

---

[38] Bennett, *Anthony Comstock*, 1016.
[39] 42nd Congress Session III Chp. 258 1873
[40] He was also the face of the organization and the national anti-obscenity effort. (Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 381- 384).
[41] "TO BE DESTROYED WHEN READ. PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL." Report from the Y.M.C.A. (New York: Jan. 28, 1874, 4) Ralph Ginzburg Collection. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

Like other censors before them, the NYSSV seemed to experience pleasure in the destruction of that which they considered immoral. Comstock staged public incinerations of vulgar literature and immoral goods, beaming as flames licked the erotica that he had so assiduously confiscated. But there existed in Comstock a competing tendency to treasure the obscene and curate it by level of salaciousness. He had a library that he referred to as the Vice Museum in which he collected "books, booklets, photographs, engravings, and miscellaneous novelties invented by psychopaths."[42] Although he believed that sex toys and pornographic magazines were so destructive that they could ruin people's lives, he freely displayed them. The way he was able to hold such conflicting beliefs was through a kind of snobbery that legitimized the obscene if it were displayed as a horrific, yet instructive, cultural curiosity. To gaze at a French tickler in the confines of a library was edifying, to use one in the bedroom was the depths of depravity.

Comstock felt it necessary to cherish these items as if he were a connoisseur of pornography, when, in fact, he claimed to be the opposite. Unfortunately, the Vice Museum was lost to history. One of Comstock's vice agents was caught running a side business peddling pieces of the collection, and he was arrested, which resulted in "the burning of the Vice Museum—a loss in its way like the destruction of the Alexandrian library," according to *The New Yorker.*[43] But Comstock's pornographic compendium was not confined to this museum. In a room secreted behind his office, he had amassed another haul of the especially pornographic that he judged too profane for anybody but himself and his successor John Sumner to see. This obscenity-laden room was so important to him that while he lay dying, he gifted the key to his

---

[42] Alva Johnston, "Profiles: Contented Crusader: John S. Sumner," *The New Yorker* February 20, 1937, 25.
[43] Ibid.

"secret back room" to Sumner. According to his successor the room was filled with "a lot of outwardly obscene stuff. Stuff that he couldn't display." Unfortunately, like the Vice Museum before it, the stock in this secret back room ended up "thrown in the incinerator."[44]

The vice society operated via an unwritten rule, the larger the prey, the greater the glee, which they expressed through joyful quantification in their reports: "At one place, where a clerk was arrested, were found some twenty thousand indecent rubber articles of various sorts, including those most repulsive."[45] But what bothered them the most was the public flouting of both legal and moral codes by sex-toy and pornography sellers. As they reported in an early pamphlet: "In 1871, the business was carried on more openly than ever before. Any one who wished, could purchase bad books or obscene articles, and retail dealers sold almost as openly as if there had been no law forbidding their noxious traffic."[46]

Comstock did not just track down sex-toy manufacturers and arrest them. He also destroyed the molds used for making them, as well as any other sex-toy specific manufacturing equipment, and their entire stock of products. He destroyed these small businessmen's livelihoods and did so with glee and a sense of moral superiority. Some commentators criticized him, but many supported him.

One of his supporters was Charles Trumbull, who in his hagiographic 1913 biography of Comstock, elliptically refers to Comstock's bravery in taking on sex-toy manufacturers:

---

[44] "Transcript of an Interview with John Saxton Sumner," August 18, 1969 by R. Christian Johnson, University of Wisconsin- Green Bay. S982, R. Christian Johnson, 2. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[45] Ibid, 7.
[46] "TO BE DESTROYED WHEN READ. PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL." Report from the Y.M.C.A (New York. Jan. 28, 1874), 9.

> At the time [1872] the traffic in vile merchandise was brazenly open. There were no federal laws against it; there were only feeble state statutes concerning books and pictures, with nothing against other articles.[47]

Later in the biography, he claims that Comstock's impetus for advocating for the federal anti-obscenity law was to prevent the sale of sex toys and contraceptives, so that the statute would cover "the whole evil in all its forms."[48]

Even when he was destroying pornography, Comstock's ultimate aim was to prevent masturbation, which he believed was morally and physically damaging, according to biographers Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech. [49] He was more concerned about the behaviors that resulted from viewing pornography, than the pornography itself, the argue. Comstock believed that reading erotic literature and looking at erotic pictures led to masturbation and "masturbation leads to death: if almost all of America's young men are addicted to this lethal practice, what hope remains for America?" Comstock said.[50] Comstock was also obsessed with preventing masturbation because he wanted to confine "sexuality to its reproductive function," according to D'Emilio and Freedman.[51] Semen-loss was also considered detrimental because of the theory of seminal economy that argued that men only possessed a set amount of semen, and they should "spend it wisely."[52]

Comstock saw the greatest threat to society as being lust. Once the sex instinct was inflamed, the amount of horrors that could happen were innumerable, he thought. He saw lust as

---

[47] Charles Galludet Trumbull, *Anthony Comstock, Fighter, 2nd. Ed.* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913), 55.
[48] Ibid., 83-84. Quote from p. 84.
[49] Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York, 1927), 265-266.
[50] Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 140.
[51] D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters,* 157.
[52] Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 8

being imposed from the outside, from external stimuli, not as a natural state of being. Unlike Freud, Comstock thought that the sex drive could easily be controlled if it was left in its natural state, that the peddlers of sex toys caused this drive to become out of control. The whole vice industry—pornography and rubber goods—sends "a message of…death—socially, morally, physically, and spiritually," he said in his book on the deleterious effects of vice on children, *Traps for the Young*.[53] Comstock referred to rubber goods as "death-dealing articles of a most infamous character."[54] Like totalitarian leaders who believed that destroying dangerous books could destroy the ideas within them and create a docile populace receptive to their ideas, Comstock believed that eliminating the sex-goods industry would eliminate sexual fantasy and masturbation and allow the nation to be pure and conform to his Christian ideals. This points to a general disagreement about whether humans are born as a blank slate or whether they are born full of sin. He believed the former. Unlike Freud, whose ideas were popularized after Comstock died, Comstock thought that a child was pure and contained few sexual thoughts. It was society that introduced children to sex, he believed. "Like a frightful monster, [lust] stands peering over the sleeping child, to catch its first thoughts on awakening," he said.[55]

Comstock even had has own theory that he called "The Chamber of Imagery." He believed that as a child grows up, he begins to collect a storehouse of images from all of the books and magazines that he consumes, and if he is exposed to obscene images, there are serious consequences: "If through eye and ear—the portals to the Chamber of Imagery—the sensuous book, picture or story is allowed to enter, the thoughts will be corrupted, the conscience seared,

---

[53] Anthony Comstock, *Traps for the Young* (New York, 1883), 131.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 132.

the heart hardened and the soul damned."[56] Comstock's ideas came from the "rhetorical package of the nineteenth century that linked the new physiology of the body and its sexual functioning to the need for reform."[57]

The law that Comstock helped draft was enforced by him from 1873 until his death in 1915, as he and other postal inspectors sought out obscenity violations. After his death, his successor John Sumner enforced the law, and portions of the so-called Comstock law continued to be enforced through 1977.[58]

In the records of the enforcers, confiscated dildos and French ticklers are listed as immoral rubber articles. One way that manufacturers got around his law was by sending their wares via express mail, which allowed them to avoid the prying eyes of the censors because Congress was not authorized to regulate express mail, only the regular U.S. mail. Consumers must have been aware of this loophole because advertisements indicated that sex toys and pornography were sent via express.[59] This loophole was later closed in 1897 when Congress passed a law "prohibiting the circulation of obscene publications via express couriers and other common carriers."[60] In addition to the national Comstock Act, 24 states created their own anti-obscenity laws known as mini-Comstocks, laws that frequently were more restrictive than the Comstock Act.[61]

---

[56] Ibid., 256-257.
[57] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex,* 402.
[58] See Bailey, "Momma's Got the Pill," 98-101; Gamson, "Struggles Over the Condom," 267-271.
[59] Letter from E.C. Henry to Theodore Schroeder, Nov. 15, 1906, 862 Box 3, Folder: Schroeder Files. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[60] Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and its Prosecution in 19th-century New York* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), 294.
[61] Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 23-24.

The NYSSV and the Progressive Era

The NYSSV was of a part of the ethos of the Progressive Era, where anti-vice organizations sprung up nationwide in an attempt to eliminate the enormous commercial sex industry that encompassed brothels, strip shows, erotic photographs, and other pornography. Reformers equated obscenity with the "other evils" that they railed against like "sweatshops and adulterated food" because they were all a part of the "urban environment," argues Paul Boyer. Their effects were just as deleterious and concrete as drinking a poison-laced patent medicine, reformers thought.[62]

To analyze why Progressive era reformers were intent on destroying dildos, we first have to examine the motivations behind the progressive movement in general, which provided the philosophical basis for all of their specific reforms. Historians differ on these motivations, but there are a few key arguments that have grounded the field. Some argue that the driving force behind Progressivism was status anxiety. In the early 19th century, professionals among the middle classes were rapidly losing status, which they attempted to regain by forming progressive reform organizations centered on temperance and women's suffrage, among other things. Professionals who had been admired as "pillars of the local community" were now lost in the swath of the mass public.[63] As Tone argues, "Once the [Comstock] law went into effect, contraceptives continued to be tied to a street-and-saloon culture profiting men and women presumed to be devoid of scruples and class: 'bad' men, 'sly' Jews, 'moral-cancer-planters,' and 'old she villains.'"[64] Commercial sexual products riled the NYSSV because they were now visible and available to the masses. This led sexual behavior to no longer remain private and to

---

[62] Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America From the Gilded Age to the Computer Age, 2nd. Ed.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 24.
[63] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 136.
[64] Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 28.

become a part of the public sphere. The NYSSV wanted to confine sex to the private sphere.[65] Once the price of print went down, pornographic books that used to be only available to the upper classes were available to all classes of people. A lower social standing made people more vulnerable to the influence of obscenity, vice officials thought. And now that women were increasingly visible in public society, they were also being exposed, which was cause for concern because like children and the lower classes, women were thought to be easily corruptible.

Yet the NYSSV was not just concerned with the lower classes. They were also intent on reforming the larger society. Societies like the NYSSV allowed groups of like-minded moralists to band together and impose their morality on the country. After the NYSSV was incorporated in 1873, many societies like it followed, including Boston's Watch and Ward Society and others in major cities like Philadelphia and San Francisco.[66] Because the NYSSV's reforms were given the force of law, they were able to wield their moral directives with unflinching authority and the sureness that comes with the backing of the federal government. NYSSV board member William E. Dodge expressed this view in a speech to his colleagues, saying "that [the members of the NYSSV] had been 'raised up by Providence to look after particular matters in which citizens are deeply interested, but which they feel powerless to control.'"[67]

Although Progressive reforms were not successful across the board, the psychic and symbolic powers of the reforms were more important than their practical implications, Hofstadter argues. Comstock and the NYSSV did not eliminate the sex-toy industry, but their theatrics and the press coverage they received affected the larger discussion of morality in an urban environment. In that goal, they fit into Hofstadter's arguments that progressivism

---

[65] D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters,* 160.
[66] Boyer, *Purity in Print,* 5. Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 9.
[67] Boyer, *Purity in Print* 8.

> was the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost.[68]

Hofstadter's arguments have been challenged by other historians, particularly Robert Wiebe who agreed with Hofstadter that progressivism was an attempt to regain the "morality and civic purity" that was believed to be a part of small town communities, but he doid not agree on who was leading these reforms. Hofstadter argued that the reformers were made up of the old middle class whose status was slipping; Wiebe argued that it was a new middle class who spearheaded the reform efforts. In the late 19th century Americans shifted from being living in small town "island communities" to living in urban areas, in an impersonal modern society, Wiebe argued. These small town communities were able to regulate morality with their Protestant ethos that reigned in immoral behavior through belief in an avenging God who would punish sinners. And, if God failed to reign in dissolute citizens, the community could do it for him, because its small size led to face-to-face interactions, and it was impossible to hide from the disapproving eye of the neighbors.[69]

Industrialization, with the coming of the railroad among other changes, led to a disintegration of these island communities, causing people to seek a new mode of organization for society. One way to do so was by creating paternalistic organizations like vice societies that took on the role of policing sexual behavior, a role previously assumed by the structures of small communities whose tight-nit social circles and church groups reigned in public sexual behavior via shaming. Tone argues that Comstock was trying to recreate small-town life in New York City: "Comstock focused on the responsibility of society, not individual parents or young people. Like the New England town writ large, the society must be cleansed so that vulnerable youth can

---

[68] Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 5-6.
[69] Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), Chapter 7.

remain sexually innocent. Comstock did the work of God and Christ in truing to rid the culture of all sexually explicit material."[70] And Paul Boyer called the NYSSV "the institutional embodiment of the disapproving stare."[71]

Because it introduced a new ethos that accepted and promoted commercialized sex, the public sale of sex and sex toys was threatening because vice societies saw this view as competing with the Protestant one. Promoting Christianity was a major part of the NYSSV's goal, even though they were serving as an arm of the U.S. government. Reform organizations were an attempt to regain lost moral authority and status by organizing volunteer organizations that became a part of the public sphere, proudly displaying their Protestant values. The NYSSV was grounded in Protestant values, and it wanted to remake the world in the here and now. By becoming moral watchdogs, they were trying to recreate the island community in an urbanized society. The public parade of prostitutes mocked the belief that sex should be confined to marriage and that married sex should be engaged in for procreative purposes only.[72]

Not everybody appreciated the paternalistic organization, In February 1878, the National Liberal League "submitted to Congress a petition signed by 50,000 to 70,000 people, asserting that the Comstock Act was an instrument of moral and religious persecution" and requested that the law be repealed or modified "so that it could not 'be used to abridge the freedom of the press or of conscious.'"[73] And one of Comstock's most outspoken critics in the 19th century wrote that "It is greatly to be regretted that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century such a base

---

[70] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 395.
[71] Boyer, *Purity in Print,* 10. For more on this subject see, Chapter 2 of *Purity in Print.*
[72] Mark Connelly argues this in his book on anti-prostitution campaigns during the late 19th century and early 20th. Connelly, *Prostitution in the Progressive Era.*
[73] However, "a House Committee replied by affirming the constitutionality of the Act and by stressing that 'the Post-Office was not established to carry instruments of vice, or obscene writings, indecent pictures, or lewd books.'" David M. Rabban, *Free Speech In Its Forgotten Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24-25.

specimen of humanity as Anthony Comstock has been selected to be the protector of public morals, to be a champion of the Church."[74] Vice reformers were worried that the "civilized morality" in America was breaking down.

As their organization was as much about symbolism as actually effecting reforms, the NYSSV presented their work in the most dramatic fashion possible. With a statistician's delight, the NYSSV quantified their work by pound of goods confiscated. Why they felt a fetishistic need to measure the number of rubber goods destroyed by physical weight as opposed to collecting more enlightening information like type of rubber good confiscated is related to their desire for symbolic flourishes. By 1880, the NYSSV had destroyed 1,316,088 "newspapers containing unlawful advertisements or obscene matter,"904 "articles for immoral use, of rubber, etc.," and 700 pounds of "lead moulds for making obscene matter."[75]

Conclusion

The history of sex toys in America is, in part, a history of their regulation. Most of the information on the companies that created dildos and French ticklers in the mid-to-late 1800s has been lost, or destroyed by Comstock, although he did collect some of these products and display them for his Vice Museum. Their company histories may not exist, but records of the destruction of their sex toys exists. These records tell a story about the booming sex-toy industry during this period.

The history of the prevention of sexual pleasure is a large part of the story of sex toys. It is also a story about subverting the naturalness of sex, as sex toys enhance human genitals, and

---

[74] Bennett, *Anthony Comstock*, 1091.

[75] The NYSSV also destroyed 24,225 pounds of "books and sheet stock," 202,679 "obscene pictures and photos," 64,094 "microscopic pictures for charms," as well as "indecent playing cards," and "wood cuts and electro-plates," among other things (Comstock, *Frauds Exposed,* 435).

sex as ordained by God should not be violated, thought Comstock. When he censored marital sex manuals, Comstock was most upset about entreaties for women to move their pelvises to give their husbands sexual pleasure. He also chafed at claims that marriages could be improved through sexual intercourse that was purposefully non-procreative. Sex-manual author Ida Craddock, who was harassed by Comstock to such an extent that she killed herself, pointed out the hypocrisy in his stance: "Anthony evidently objects to pelvic movements being written about (despite the fact that he has them so much in his mind that he whistled the music of the Koochy-Koochy while calmly going through my bookcase of books)."[76]

Ralph Ginzburg , the founder of *Eros* and *Avant-Garde* magazines, who was planning to write a biography on Comstock, noted Comstock's obsession with arresting sex-toy manufacturers. In his notes for his partially completed book, Ginzburg says, "Comstock was clever enough to pick on victims…who could not possibly enlist the support of the public. The dildoe and rubber goods men, he [Comstock] attacks the worst."[77] Comstock attacked the sex-toy industry due to the public ridicule of Comstock for censoring classic literature, which allowed him to avoid the charge of violating the First Amendment, a charge frequently foisted at him by journalists. First-amendment historian David M. Rabban says that "Censorship and convictions under the Comstock Act provoked many libertarian radicals to move from theoretical support of free speech to active engagement in its defense." In 1878 The National Defense Association was formed in part to take on the Comstock Act and to help "defendants prosecuted under it."[78]

---

[76] Letter from Ida Craddock to Mr. Pentecost, Feb. 9th, 1902, Ralph Ginzburg Papers, MSS 863; Box 2, Folder Craddock. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[77] Typed Note, Box 14, Folder 4. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[78] Rabban, *Free Speech* , 24-25.

Yet Comstock did not stop the rubber industry from producing sex toys. The industry continued to produce sex toys, but they changed their advertising pitches to eliminate sexual words. These marketing strategies are the subject of my next chapter.

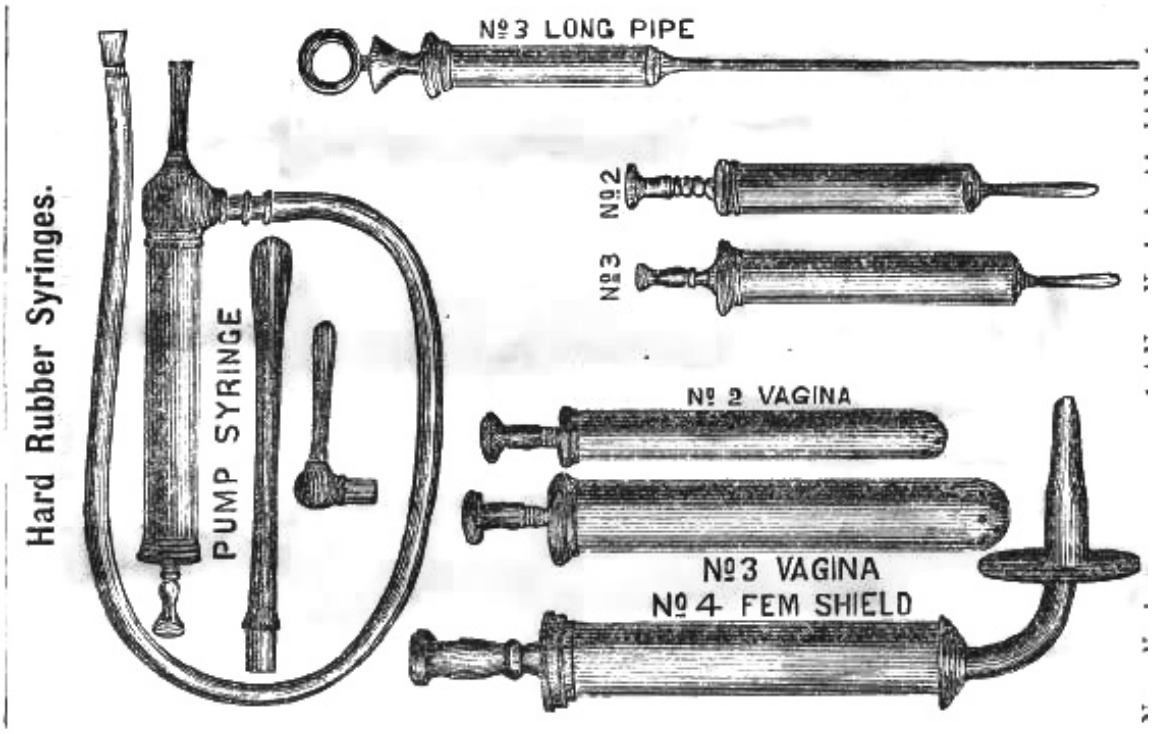


Figure 1: Close-up of Goodyear Rubber Company's Syringes, classified under "Druggists' Department." Goodyear Rubber Company, *Trade Journal No. 4,* Baltimore, MD, 1877, 2.

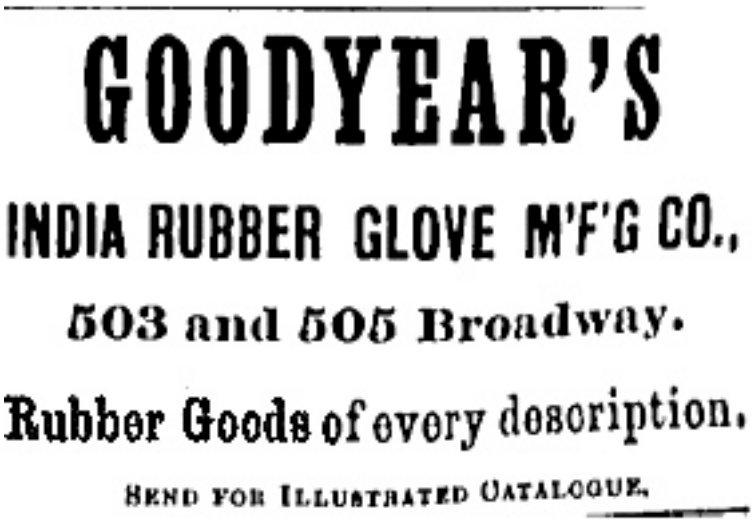


Fig 2. India Rubber Glove Company Advertisement from *The Independent,* September 30, 1886, 38.

Figure 3: Photograph of Anthony Comstock, 1913.
Source: Trumbull, Charles Galludet. *Anthony Comstock, Fighter, 2nd. Ed.* New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913.

Figure 4: Seal of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice.
Source: *The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice Twentieth-Annual Report.* New York, 1894.

Chapter 4: Selling Sex-Toys During the Comstock Era

Grand Fancy Bijou Catalogue

OF THE

Sporting Man's Emporium,

FOR 1870.

Our Catalogue for this year will be found to comprise all the Books and Fancy Articles which have an existence, and are of any genuine worth. We have introduced this year some new goods never before seen in this country, and improved the quality of the rest to a degree heretofore unequaled, and our customers will find no relaxation in the promptness, fairness and liberality which we think we can say without boasting, has hitherto distinguished "THE SPORTING MAN'S EMPORIUM!" As it is universally admitted that ours is the leading establishment in this line of business in the United States, we are, from its extent, enabled to furnish articles of a far superior quality and at lower prices than the numereus small fry and bogus concerns who are "without a local habitation or a name."

In 1870, a man who wanted to buy a sex toy had three main options. He could purchase sex toys disguised as medical devices from pharmacies, order sex toys from advertisements he saw in newspapers, or buy sex toys openly marketed as such from a sporting-goods catalog. If he took the latter route, he would have perused a catalog like "The Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog of the Sporting Man's Emporium of 1870," which featured "all the Books and Fancy Articles which have an existence, and are of any genuine worth." *Fancy articles* was a euphemism for the sexual goods inside, which included *patent male safes* (condoms), *fancy volumes* (erotic novels), and

dildos (or dildoes, as they were spelled in the 19th century).[1] If he felt so inclined he could add a "French Tobacco Box" containing a "Facsimile of a Deposit of Human Manure Price $1.50" to his order, a fake moustache or a pack of marked playing cards. Such catalogs allowed men to dabble in the commercial sexual world made possible through an improved mail system facilitated by a strong railway (Fig. 1).[2]

Dildoes were featured on page six of the 12-page catalog, as the first item listed under the category of "Rubber Goods," a coded term that frequently implied sexual uses. Under this category were suspensory bandages, patent male safes, menstrual products and ticklers. "The Dildoe: or Artificial Penis" was described in great detail (Fig. 2):

> This instrument is manufactured of white rubber, and is a wonderful facsimile of the natural penis of man. For reserved females it is a happy and harmless substitute for the natural 'Champion of Women's Rights.'[3]

The tone was cheerful and enthusiastic, with the dildoe described variously as "wonderful" and a "happy and harmless substitute." The latter description reassured prospective male customers that the dildoe was, in fact, not going to replace them, as their penises were "the natural 'Champion of Women's Rights.'" Eighteen years later' dildo marketing was dramatically less descriptive, as an advertisement from *The National Police Gazette* demonstrates (Figs. 3 & 4).[4]

> RUBBER GOODS. Latest Improved. Gents, 25c., 3 for 50c. 8 for $1. Ladies, 50c each 3 for $1. Bachelor's Friend, $1; Old Maid's ditto, $1: both life size and true to nature. Our new Tickler, 25c, and Silent Assistant, 50c, are sure to give satisfaction. Magic Invigorator, $1. Worth $20. Secure from observation. H.J. Relay & Co. Box 5150, Boston, Mass.[5]

---

[1] I will switch between these two spellings throughout the chapter.
[2] Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 199), 22.
[3] "Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog," 1870. American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.
[4] Advertisement in *The National Police Gazette* August 26, 1888, 15.
[5] Ibid, 15.

Granted, the earlier ad was in a catalog and the later one showed up in a newspaper, so a difference in advertising styles is to be expected. Yet, essential changes in the words used to describe dildoes are telling. The headline has changed from "The Dildoe or Artificial Penis" to "Rubber Goods;" the title shifted from being a description of the sex toy to being a description of the material that the sex toy is made out of. The ad is full of codes that the consumer has to uncover. "Dildoe" is now rephrased as "Old Maid's Friend." Artificial vaginas are called "Bachelor's Friends." For the ad to work consumers had to be able to recognize that the Old Maid's Friend was a euphemism for "dildoe," but the ad could not be so overt that obscenity enforcers could tell with certainty that the company was selling sex toys. So this company added key phrases like "life size and true to nature," to make sure consumers got the sexual undertones, but they avoided any mention of genitals and any use of the word "dildo." Only the reader who was already informed about the sexual culture would fully understand the ad.[6]

In this chapter I will detail how sex-toy companies marketed their devices during the second half of the 19th century, demonstrating that obscenity laws did not destroy the sex-toy industry, but instead shifted advertising practices. The marketing of the consumer sex toy in America from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s can best be thought of as a cat and mouse game, where retailers and producers of sex toys attempted to evade prosecution by using euphemisms in their advertisements, while Anthony Comstock and other Post Office agents tried to determine what exactly these euphemisms meant. Comstock attempted to entrap companies them by coercing rubber goods outlets to send their illegal circulars and sex toys to him. Even before Comstock, companies discreetly sent out dildos and condoms to prospective customers, using Express mail: "All fancy goods will be sent by EXPRESS, and in *no other way*…goods

[6] Advertisement in *The National Police Gazette* Feb 23, 1889.

will be done up so as to render it impossible to detect their contents, and express agents know nothing of the nature of the goods." (Fig. 1)

Companies had reason to fear. For the NYSSV, dildos were the epitome of vice. In a 1901 letter, NYSSV member Cephas Brainerd said:

> I remember very well when the first seizure was made of the rubber articles…I attended in court where there were a number of young people who were employed in their manufacture, as witnesses, and the boxes were produced which contained some of the articles. I remember the Police Justice, who might well be supposed to have had a good deal of familiarity with things of that sort from the nature of his office, turned away from the exhibit as if it produced a severe sickness at the stomach.[7]

Brainard's portrayal of dildos as vomit inducing demonstrates how powerful the NYSSV thought dildos were. If the NYSSV believed that simply being in the presence of a dildo could cause physical revulsion, they must have surmised that masturbating with one would cause a person innumerable harm.

Sex-Toy Distribution

During the late 1800s, drugstores, department stores and novelty stores sold dildos and other sex-toys. "Respectable" department and drugstores stores sold sex toys as medical goods, vaginal syringes, dilators, and vacuum pumps. Although some consumers must have had an idea what the other uses of these devices were because in pornography the term *vaginal syringe* was synonymous with *dildo*.[8] To be sure, many of these sex-toys had multiple uses, some of them non-sexual, and some customers who bought them were not using them for sexual purposes. But judging from the sexualized advertisements and what media the ads were placed in, it is clear that companies were trying to convey the sexualized nature of their devices. When companies

---

[7] Letter from Cephas Brainerd to Law Offices, Stokes Building. 47 Cedar Street. October 22, 1901, 2. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 1, Folder 5. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Madison, Wisconsin.

[8] *The Story of a Dildoe, a Tale in Five Tableaux* (London: Privately Printed, 1891).

began selling their sexual devices in department stores, such stores were a fairly new part of the commercial landscape. Department stores began appearing in America in the mid-18th century, but they did not flourish until the latter part of the century with the establishment of Macy's (1861), Lord & Taylor (1867), and Bloomingdales (1872). They dramatically changed the conventions of product marketing. The fixed prices and return policies established by department stores eliminated price haggling and improved consumers' trust in products produced by companies thousands of miles away from their homes.[9] Consumers who did not live in cities could access sex toys through mail-order catalogs for department stores or via sporting-goods catalogs like the one mentioned above. Or they could purchase sex toys from companies that advertised in the back of sporting-goods newspapers.

Mail order was big business in the United States, and sex-toy companies were now able to distribute their goods throughout the country thanks to the Union Pacific Railroad.[10] Helping this transformation was that the price of shipping had radically dropped: "Between 1820 and 1860, the cost of shipping a ton of goods one mile dropped from 20 cents to a penny, and the goods arrived five to ten times faster." Cheaper rates caused companies to flood the mails with advertising circulars. And by 1863, home delivery was common in many cities.[11] All these changes led to a shift in the uses of the post and led Comstock to want to censor it, historian David Henkin argues. The post shifted from a medium that facilitated "long-distance political communication" to "a system that allowed strangers to communicate cheaply throughout the

---

[9] Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 26, 28.
[10] Ibid.,14,16.
[11] One of the arguments for home delivery was that women should not be alone in the public space of the post office. David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 86-89.

country," Henkin says, disrupting "forms of social and commercial communication."[12] Sex-toy companies took advantage of the newfound reach of the post by sending their catalogs to prospective customers whose addresses they had purchased from dealers or through flipping through school rosters.[13]

Advertising in the Nineteenth Century

Consumers were receiving more solicitations from sex goods companies than ever before, but many of the circulars and advertisements were written in code because companies were attempting to evade the anti-obscenity laws. So consumers had to become amateur semioticians, decoding clues, analyzing images, searching for the underlying meanings of the advertisements and the sexual uses of the products by learning the euphemisms bandied about in the advertisements. They had a lot of practice because contraceptives were illegal, so contraceptive ads were also coded.

Sometimes the covert marketing of sexual products—and covert sexual discourse in general—during the Victorian era is misinterpreted as general cultural ignorance or repression of sexuality. In fact, as Michel Foucault argues, just the opposite was the case.[14] Numerous sexual discourses populated newspapers, not just in the advertisements, but also in the endless stories of arrests of "smut peddlers," pornographers, and traders in obscene rubber goods. Sex was everywhere in the print media. It was rarely praised, but always present. The more obvious the sexual use of a product, the greater the level of camouflage. For example, the penis shape of dildos prevented them from being shown in advertisements, unless they were advertised as medical goods like dilators or syringes.

---

[12] Ibid., 170-171.
[13] Ibid., 158.
[14] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Volume 1,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

Chapter Two argued that the medicalization of the rubber phallus as a *dilator* allowed for it to be openly marketed as a medical device. The dilator did not threaten sexual mores because doctors prescribed dilators as tools that enabled men to have sex with their wives and not as devices that allowed women to masturbate. When Comstock's law went into effect, *dilator* was still used as a term in some advertisements, but the ads in mainstream magazines chose a strategy of vagueness, referring to their wares as *rubber goods*, a term that was used to refer to a variety of banned goods including condoms, diaphragms, dilators, syringes, and dildos. But in the sporting press, consumer rubber devices sometimes had much more suggestive names than *dilator*. Once Comstock and the vice societies redefined the dominant meaning of rubber phalluses, labeling them *immoral rubber goods* and *masturbatory articles,* the devices shifted from being tools used to enhance heterosexual marriage to devices that facilitated a women's sexual practice that many saw as being threatening to marriage. The technology became dangerous: rubber phalluses were now potentially socially disruptive devices.

Nonetheless, companies continued to promote dildos, so the business continued to flourish even with rubber phalluses now officially considered *immoral.* Dildo advertisements peppered the back pages of the sporting papers. which were a part of the penny press, a term for cheaply produced papers that depended primarily on advertising for profit, "a mass medium that was commercial in outlook and orientation, but that absorbed a vernacular idiom."[15] These types of newspapers shifted the emphasis on newspapers as vehicles for political parties to newspapers as commercial entities whose goal was to bring audiences to advertisers. [16] Technological changes that allowed newspapers to be printed more inexpensively led to this influx of low-cost

---

[15] Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of Urban Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 10-11.
[16] Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 78.

papers targeted to young, sexually active men, so naturally much of the advertising that newspapers carried was for syphilis "cures," condoms, sex toys, and racy French photographs.

Many of the ads in sporting and general papers were for patent medicines, liquid tonics that claimed to cure all manner of diseases from syphilis to dandruff to kidney ailments and usually contained anywhere from 20-44 percent alcohol, or cocaine, opium, cannabis, heroin and morphine.[17] Although ads for patent medicines were ubiquitous, they were not without controversy and some newspapers refused to carry them.[18] Patent-medicine ads were more openly sexual than sex-toy ads because patent medicines were not illegal while sex toys were. But it was not just the patent-medicine ads that had sexual themes. "Maybe the most coherent conclusion one can draw about the ferment of fantastic advertising during the late nineteenth century is that it played counterpoint to the dominant culture's celebration of mind over body,"[19] Jackson Lears argues. Yet because sex toys were illegal, ads for them did not follow this dominant trend. Even though sex toys were bodily technologies, ads for them usually did not mention the body.

In addition to advertising in the sporting press, sex-toy companies also advertised in magazines, which were a new medium in the mid-1800s. Most magazines accepted advertisements, and "by 1879, advertisers promoted products in nearly 400 monthly periodicals

---

[17] A. Walker Bingham, *The Snake Oil Syndrome: Patent Medicine Advertising* (Hanover, MA: The Christopher Publishing House,1994), 6. A few prominent newspapers refused to carry ads for snake-oil liniments and whiskey cures, including the *New York Post* and the *Seattle Post Inquirer*. (Fox, 66).

[18] Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 42.

[19] Ibid., 153.

and over 4,000 secular weeklies with a circulation of approximately 15 million copies each week."[20] However, many magazines refused to accept rubber-goods advertisements.

Many companies that manufactured sex toys sold their wares in department store catalogs like Sears', which featured phallic vaginal syringes."[21] (Fig. 5) Although the syringes clearly looked like dildos, the term *vaginal syringe* has a medical tinge to it, and women did use these syringes for douching, so they had a legitimate "moral" purpose. Although the images of them were sexual, the context was sanitary, medical, clinical. In other words, Sears was a legitimate retailer and sex-toy companies gained cultural capital by being featured inside the pages of their magazines. But when companies advertised in sporting papers this downgraded their cultural status. Sex-toy ads in this medium also lacked illustrations, probably to avoid generating too much attention. Sex-toy companies both communicated and hid the sexual uses of their devices.[22]

During the second half of the 19th century, the advertising industry was still in its infancy. The first ad agencies were formed in the late 1860s, but they simply helped companies buy space in newspapers; agencies did not write or design ads. [23] They did not take on this role until the 1890s. Most sex-toy companies probably designed their ads themselves.[24] Advertisements shifted from promoting technological progress and championing industry in the 1830s to 1870s to spotlighting consumer choice and specific categories of consumer goods in the 1880s to early

---

[20] Sivulka, *Cultural History of Advertising*, 31.
[21] *Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalogue No. 111,* 1902, p. 456.
[22] Ads for the Hygeia Vibratory Appliance and the Electro-Biohemic and Hermenic Vibrator Cure were openly sexual (in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* respectively), while ads for White Cross Vibrators frequently featured images of phallic stimulators.
[23] Fox, *The Mirror Makers*, 14.
[24] Stewart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire*, 10-11.
[24] In the 1900s, some vibrator companies hired ad agencies, but I have found no evidence that rubber sex-toy companies did the same. A search in N.W. Ayer's archive found no evidence.

1900s.[25] The popular style of advertising (for non-patent medicines) in the late 1800s was "common sense, direct and factual copy." John E. Power, the copywriter for the John Wanamaker department store, originated this soft-sell approach but sex-toy companies' ads could not use this style for legal reasons.[26] By the late 1880s America was beginning to be a consumer society, and families had shifted to creating their own goods at home to purchasing goods from stores. As a mass market formed, companies created brand names for their nationwide products, which generated a sense of trust among consumers. However, sex-toy companies could only participate in the new culture of branding if they pretended their devices were not used for sexual pleasure because as Lears argued, advertising at the turn of the century created a "symbolic universe where certain cultural values were sanctioned and others rendered marginal or invisible."[27] The result was that openly marketed sex toys lacked brand names and therefore consumers could not be confident in the product quality.

"Dildoe" Disappears

Text-heavy advertisements for dildoes could not legally contain the very terms that described their products the most effectively. Whether or not a company faced criminal prosecution or gained enormous profits hinged upon word choice. One word that companies avoided with a passion after the passage of the Comstock Acts was *dildoe*.

The NYSSV even expunged the word *dildoe* from the arrest reports they gave to the media. For example, their internal report for 1875 details the New York City-based rubber goods importer Morris Bass's arrest, listing the following items that they seized: "6 dozen ticklers, 200 dozen condums, 12 Womb veils, 70 obscene microscopic charms, 2 vaginal syringes. And

---

[25] Pamela Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 32.
[26] Fox, *Mirror Makers,* 27-28.
[27] Lears, *Fables of Abundance,* 3; Sivulka, *Cultural History of Advertising*, 41-50.

dildoes."[28] But the version in the magazine *Commercial Advertiser* leaves out these details, instead saying: "There were seized 250 dozen of rubber goods, and between 60 and 70 obscene watch charms, besides a lot of miscellaneous works of the vilest character."[29]

Why *dildoe* evoked such a response among censors may be related to its association with pornography, prostitution, and non-Western cultures. In mid-19th century America, *dildoe* was rarely used outside of pornographic literature and sporting goods catalogs. Feminist scholar Anjali Arondekar says that the India-rubber dildo "appear[ed] as staple fare in Victorian pornography, either carefully highlighted as in the case of *The Story of a Dildoe* or casually inserted in random scenarios of sexual pleasure."[30] Not only were dildos ubiquitous, she says, but also "the material of the dildo is always remarked on and cited as a guarantee of the dildo's superiority and efficiency."[31] Arondekar argues that English pornography focused on "India rubber" and the manufacturing process to imply that "primitive" people who live on British colonies were responsible for the sexual uses of rubber. The dildo was a symbol of wild sexuality contained and legitimized by empire, she says. Writing in the late 1800s, British sexologist Havelock Ellis also argued that dildos were devices that originated in non-Western cultures.[32] Europeans, he claimed, preferred to masturbate by using objects that they found around the house like hairpins, bananas, sewing machines and bicycles.[33] Ellis argued prostitutes were the

---

[28] Typical Comstock Cases in 1875 (Post Conroy) (Typed note by Ralph Ginzburg) Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 4.Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.
[29] "City Intelligence: A Comstock Raid; Numerous Arrests and Seizures; Enforcing the State Law; Last Night's Arrests," *Commercial Advertiser;* New York, NY, August 10, 1875, 4
[30] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 115.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol 1.: The evolution of modesty: the phenomena of sexual periodicity, auto-erotism*, 3rd Edition (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1921), 168.
[33] Ibid., 177-178.

main users of dildos because they "have a less versatile and perverted concentration on the sexual impulse to prevent any general recourse to such specialized methods of solitary gratification."[34]

The origins of the word *dildo* are as mysterious as the object itself. The Oxford English Dictionary says that *dildo* is "a word of obscure origin, used in the refrain of ballads. Also, a name of the penis or phallus, or a figure thereof; *spec.* an artificial penis used for female gratification." The first written record of *dildo* uses the sexual meaning. It is in the 1st volume of John Florio's 1598, *A Worlde of Wordes, or most copious, and exact dictionarie in Italian and English*, where Florio translates the Italian *pinco* as "a prick, a pillicock, a pintle, a dildoe," demonstrating the meaning of *dildoe* as a penis. He also translates "Pastinaca muranese" ("Murano parsnip") as "a dildoe of glasse."[35]

Some believe that the word may have come from *diletto*: an Italian word for "a woman's delight," or *dally* which means "to toy."[36] Other theories point to its origins in the Old English word *dill-doll* which comes from "the Norse word 'dilla,' meaning 'to soothe.'"[37] By 1889, *dildo* was out of favor, according to a slang dictionary of the time, and the more popular term was *broom handle*, but the definition of *dildo* demonstrates its status in the culture:

> An instrument made of various soft, pliable substances, and resembling the male pudendum, used by women, who possessing strong amatory passions, and forced to live celibate lives, are afraid of pregnancy following natural copulation.[38]

---

[34] Ibid., 170.
[35] "dildo, n.1". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52768?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=WQZq7q& (accessed May 26, 2014).
[36] The first use of dildo as ballad refrain was in the late 1500s, in a Thomas Nashe poem, called *The Choice of Valentines, Nashe's Dildo* or *The Merrie Ballad of Nashe his Dildo*.
[37] Stephen Arnott, *Sex: A User's Guide* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2002), 213.
[38] *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant: Embracing English, American and Anglo-Indian Slang, Pidgin English, Tinkers' Jargon, and other Irregular Phraseology, Volume 1*, edited by Albert Barrère, Charles Godfrey Leland, (Ballantyne Press, 1889), 310.

According to this definition, the dildoe is a device for women with high sex drives, particularly nuns, and women without access to good birth control. The definition implied that women who could have sex with men without fear of pregnancy would choose "real" sex over dildo sex.

With *dildo* carrying such a ribald connotation, it disappeared from the popular press. This led to an explosion in euphemisms from the convincingly dull—*rubber goods*, *fancy goods* and *fancy articles*—to the more obvious—*Old Maid's Friend*, *Phantom Lover*, *Silent Husband*, "the Maid's Safe—guard, the Widow's comfort, and the Wife's Consolation."[39] Rubber companies' advertisements were riddled with various sexual codes, whose euphemisms contraceptive scholars have uncovered: "In discrete ads, the condom…became the *cap*, *sheath*, *capote*, *pouch*, *male shield*, or simply the *rubber good*."[40]

Like Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of pornography, "I know it when I see it," Comstock's law never clearly articulated the definition of an immoral rubber article. This placed rubber companies and druggists in the untenable position of not knowing whether or not the products they produced or carried in their stores were illegal. This confusion led activists to print pamphlets explaining the intricacies of the law. In a circular distributed to druggists by The National Defense Association—an organization formed in 1878 to take on the Comstock act and to help "defendants prosecuted under it—authors E.B. Foote and A.L. Rawson tried to make sense of the ban on immoral rubber goods."[41]

NO MAN IS SAFE IN RESUMING

---

[39] *Story of a Dildoe*, 15.
[40] Aine Collier, *The Humble Little Condom: A History* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 146.
[41] David M. Rabban, *Free Speech In Its Forgotten Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24-25.

> Trade in goods under the ban. In the recent raids upon manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, all sorts of goods have been seized, long and short rubber goods, pessaries and skins; but in a few places long goods have been left and only shorts and pessaries taken…it is of interest to druggists generally to have it
>
> **SETTLED ONCE FOR ALL**
> What their rights in this class of trade are, what goods may be kept without danger of loss through seizure, and under what circumstances or representations such goods may be safely sold, if at all.[42]

What *long and short rubber goods* are is unclear. But since *skins* was a reference to condoms, and *pessaries* referred to *diaphragms*, it is likely that *long and short rubber goods* were a euphemism for sex toys. Free speech advocates Foote Jr. and Rawson later credited their own efforts in challenging Comstock on free speech grounds for leading Comstock to focus on less publicly defensible industries like the trade in sex toys. Comstock also needed publicity, they argued, and one way to gain publicity was to take down a new industry. Foote and Rawson warned druggists that Comstock was confiscating rubber syringes, which, in their eyes, were "legitimate." Comparing the plight of druggists to that of "publishers and artists" who were targeted by Comstock, Foote and Rawson framed the attack on druggists as un-American, and a violation of civil liberties.

Comstock's assault on the rubber industry was serious enough that on October 24, 1885, the major journal *Medical Record* said, "We trust that Mr. Comstock will succeed in stopping the India-rubber branch of the drug business."[43] One month later another medical journal said that

---

[42] "To the Gentlemen of the Drug Trade who May be Interested in The Recent Comstockian Raids," The National Defense Association, 1885. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, MSS 862, Schroder Files, Misc. and Unidentified Cases, Folder 4. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

[43] "News of the Week," *Medical Record,* October 24, 1885, Vol. 28, 465.

"Anthony Comstock has commenced a crusade against the druggists of New York who deal in certain India-rubber goods in violation of the penal code."[44]

Sex-Toy Ads in the Sporting Press

Comstock targeted four magazines for their rubber goods advertisements: *The Day's Doings*, *The New Varieties, The National Police Gazette,* and *The Sunday Mercury.*[45] He bragged that he used these ads as an aid to "unearthing this hydra-headed monster," which was how he referred to the pornography and immoral rubber goods industry. [46] It is not clear how he was able to identify the codes that companies used to hide their sex-toy messages, but he sent away for many of the products advertised in these magazines, even if they had nothing to do with sex. He detailed his methods in a letter to a member of the NYSSV, saying that he sought out companies that were advertising "beautiful views or pictures of some celebrated place or person." But when he sent away for these images, he instead received:

> obscene pictures…and catalogues of these vile books and rubber goods. For be it known that wherever these books or catalogs of these books go, there you will ever find, as almost indispensable, a complete list of rubber articles for masturbation, or for the professed prevention of conception.[47]

Because many sex-toy retailers claimed that their catalogs were family-friendly picture books in ads, it is difficult to determine just how widespread sex-toy retailers' advertising was. But if such codes were commonly used, ads for sex-toy catalogs could have blanketed a large amount of publications.

---

[44] "News of the Week," *The Medical Age: A Semi-Monthly Review of Medicine,* November 25, 1885, 519.
[45] I will be focusing exclusively in ads in *The National Police Gazette* because it is the only publication I was able to access the full run of.
[46] Letter to Clinton Merriam January 18, 1873. Reprinted in *On the Reproductive Organs and the Venereal* by John Milton Scudder (Cincinnati: Wilstach, Baldwin & Co. Printers, 1887), 92.
[47] C.E. Rogers *Secret Sins of Society* (Minneapolis, MN.: Union Publishing Company, 1881),14.

One of the publications that carried the most sex-toy ads was *The National Police Gazette.*[48] Founded in 1845 in New York City, *The National Police Gazette* tried to evade censors by only publishing sexual material in the form of police blotters. That way, the stories were less likely to be considered salacious because they could be couched as legitimate news stories that were informing readers about the campaign to eliminate immorality in the city. This strategy helped the sensational tabloid paper evade censorship for the first five years of its existence.[49] The title of a story from the April 27, 1878, issue sums up the general tone of the paper in the late 1800s: "A SANGUINARY SENSATION: How a Pious Ohio Farmer put a Literal Interpretation on the Old Testament by Slaying his Daughter FOR ALLEGED ADULTERY."[50]

The back pages of *The Police Gazette* were filled with sexual advertisements. Because of its advertisements, *The Police Gazette* was a target, and Comstock, as well as his successor, John Sumner, successfully prosecuted some of the companies that advertised in it.[51] In the 1878 report of the vice society, they railed against the paper: "The Canadians have sent a solemn protest to our Post Office Department against sending the vile *Police Gazette* through the mails across their lines. Western cities are legislating in their councils against it, and will not permit it to be sold in their limits."[52]

---

[48] Ads that I can be nearly certain were for sex toys. It is nearly impossible to prove that the ads for pictures were really coded sex-toy catalog ads.
[49] Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and its Prosecution in 19th-century New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 90-91.
[50] *The National Police Gazette,* Vol. 32, Issue 31, Page 3, Published in New York, April 27, 1878.
[51] "Action on Books, Magazines, Pamphlets Etc." John Sumner Papers, MSS 146, Folder 317 (N.Y.S.S.V. Lists), 1. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[52] Comstock, *Frauds Exposed,* 439.

Most ads in *The Police Gazette* were small text-only rectangles, the size of classified ads. A few featured illustrations, but none of the sex toy ads did. Pornographic playing cards, condoms, and electric belts were the most widely advertised products in addition to sex toys. Possibly as a reflection of their frequent prosecution, sex toy and condom companies were the vaguest and least sexual of the advertisers. Ads in *The Police Gazette* never gave details on how the sex toys should be used. This represented a shift from the style used in sporting-goods catalogs, which probably had more leeway since they were sent only to a targeted group of people. For example, a description of the "French Yarnal; or Ladies' Tickler" in The Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog contained a wealth of information on how to use it and why (Fig. 2):

> The object of the Yarnal is to cause the lady to come to Time and make her do a large share of the labor, thereby giving much more pleasure and enjoyment to the gentleman, as it would be impossible for the lady to remain still while one is being used; the titillation being increased two hundred percent, and will cause any lady to come to "TEA." They do no harm to either sex but will cause the lady to love and stick with him who has first used it with her, as the sensation be the same as that felt the first time the act was performed in her life.[53]

It is clear from this ad that in the late 1800s some men knew that women required clitoral stimulation to have an orgasm. It also assumed that women are sexually experienced. And the message to men is that men who give their lovers orgasms are more likely to have those partners fall in love with them. What the description of the tickler says about women's sexuality during the Victorian era overturns the assumption of the women as chaste and out-of-touch with her bodies. However, it could very likely also be a male fantasy of a lascivious female.

But the Comstock Law forced companies to make their ads for ticklers and dildos vague. No longer could they explain how to use a tickler or why women's sexual pleasure was

---

[53] "Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog," 1870, 7. American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

important. A typical ad featured sex toys in a list of other rubber products, usually including condoms, as rubber companies usually produced both products (Fig. 6):

> **RUBBER SAFE 30c**, Tickler 30c, French Secret 30c: Teaser 10c. LOVERS' GAZETTE, Chicago.[54]

Bolder companies gave a vague idea of what the tickler was used for:

> **SPANISH TICKLER,** irresistible, makes the girls squeal, 15c; 2 for 25c. Box 72. Richmond, Va.[55]

However, "making the girls squeal" is hardly a detailed enough description to give consumers an idea of what the tickler was. Because companies could not legally describe the tickler, the only consumers who would have been interested in ordering one were those who already knew what a tickler was or who were willing to gamble money on an unknown sex device.[56]

Unlike other new technologies, ticklers and dildos were advertised to consumers with very little or no information explaining why they were desirable.[57] While Wanamaker's copywriter John Power is credited with pioneering the "soft-sell," sex-toy companies should be credited with pioneering the "anti-sell." They frequently marketed their devices without any accompanying ad copy, simply stating the name of their products, which were usually false anyway.[58] Sex-toy companies were not the only companies to have such basic advertising, but they were the only new-technology companies to do so. Companies who sold fungible products like sugar or flour could get away with a "strategy" of simply listing their products because

---

[54] *Rubber safe* was a euphemism for condom, while *tickler* and *teaser* were sex toys, the former usually being a modified condom with bumps and ridges designed to give sexual pleasure to women. Lovers Gazette ad in *The National Police Gazette*, October 30, 1886, 15.
[55] Advertisement in Sept 7, 1889, *The National Police Gazette.*
[56] Perhaps catalogs still contained this information.
[57] Advertisements appeared in at least 40 issues of *The National Police Gazette* from 1883-1889. See ad for Gem Novelty company's tickler in classified section, June 8, 1889, 15, *The National Police Gazette.*
[58] I use the term "new technologies" to mean the "vulcanized rubber dildo" and the tickler.

consumers knew what these products were.[59] But sex toys were not universally recognizable. Sporting men who read pornography knew what they were, but sex toys did not have a foothold in popular culture. With sex-toys having such little cultural visibility and ads for them being curt and confusing, it is amazing that companies were able to sell any of them. The fact that many companies sold sex toys and that more companies seemed to always be entering the business is a testament to the desirability of the product. Consumers were willing to scour tiny classified ads, deconstruct them, and send money to anonymous companies with no reputation simply to obtain a dildo. So in a way the NYSSV was right: dildos did possess an extraordinary power that drew some people to obtain them no matter the cost.

In addition to dildos, popular sex toys at the time were artificial vaginas, with names like the *Duplex* and the *Model*:

> **SINGLE MEN** Our **"Duplex"** is a perfect substitute. A new invention for males. Always ready. Guart'd 1 yr. Prepaid. Sealed $1[60]

The ad featured many clues, but required prior knowledge. The fact that the ad was directed to *single men* implied that it was a masturbatory device, while the phrase *perfect substitute* implied that it was shaped like a vagina. *Always ready* indicated that the artificial vagina had advantages over a real-life vagina because it was available at all hours.

Many other sex-toys were advertised whose designs will probably be lost to history, such as the Pleasure Promoter, which was sold using puffery typical of the time, as "The great sensation of the age." [61] Another company sold the enticingly named *Sensation Tube*, which was

---

[59] Although these companies began to create brand-names in the 19th century to distinguish their commodities from other companies.
[60] Advertisement *The National Police Gazette,* Nov. 28, 1896, 14.
[61] Advertisement in *The National Police Gazette*, Sept. 1, 1888, 15.

probably a male masturbation sleeve.[62] Others had fanciful names like *The Needle of Cleopatra,* which was "For ladies and gents. The old Egyptian Renewal. Price $1."[63]

Sex-toy ads in the sporting press were sparse and contained very little information about the products, but ads in the mainstream newspapers were even vaguer. They rarely listed the sexual products they sold, but somehow they managed to get caught.

Sex-Toys Ads in the Mainstream Press

Rubber companies that sold sex toys, as well as companies that sold vacuum-erection devices advertised in family-friendly newspapers. Comstock sought out ads in these publications but they were more difficult to find than those in sporting papers. One company that he targeted was run by Daniel Hodgman, a rubber goods salesman whose shop was on the corner of Nassau Street in New York City, a notorious area for sex-toy dealers. Hodgman's ads demonstrated how understated most sex-toy ads in the mainstream press were. His December 22, 1855, ad in *Home Journal* demonstrates this strategy (Fig. 7). The ad lists legal rubber goods at the top: "India-Rubber Coats, Capes, Pants, Leggins, Gloves, Mittens, Overshoes and Sandals." "Fancy Articles"—a euphemism for condoms, dildos, and ticklers— are only listed at the end. Not all consumers were aware what this term meant.[64] In that sense, the term was a "dog-whistle" symbol that could only be heard by the right customers. Another of Hodgman's ads , this time from a December 14, 1865, *Charleston Daily News* (Fig. 8) simply states that he sells "All Kinds of India Rubber Goods." Because *rubber goods* was itself a euphemism for sex toys and contraceptives, this ad had the same effect, communicating the sale of sexual goods to customers who were interested in them while other customers probably remained oblivious.

---

[62] G.M. Hanson ad, *The National Police Gazette,* Feb 16 1889, 14.
[63] Advertisement in *The National Police Gazette*, Nov. 28 1896, 14.
[64] Nor did "fancy articles" always mean sex toys or condoms. Sometimes it meant decorative trinkets or other non-sexual goods.

Why Comstock targeted Hodgman is unclear. Hodgman's rubber business was by no means a sex-toy- only business. Hodgman sold "Baptismal Pants for the Clergy" in addition to dildos.[65] And in 1843 he had been awarded a diploma by the state of New York for "the best India rubber shoes,"[66] another for an India rubber air bed in 1850,[67] and a silver medal in 1851 for "best general display of India rubber goods."[68] Perhaps it was Hodgman's flair for marketing that upset Comstock, as Hodgman sent his salesman west to follow the Gold Rush, bearing rubber backpacks branded with "Hodgman Rubber Company" on them.[69] Comstock arrested Hodgman for selling obscene material in 1872, a year after he filed for bankruptcy.[70] He confiscated 20,000 of Hodgman's rubber goods, which included dildos. [71] The stress of both the bankruptcy and the arrest must have taken its toll on him because Hodgman died two years' later.[72] After he died, his children took over the company, and it is likely they continued to produce sex toys and condoms, as a promotional booklet says that they were in the business of "Druggist Sundries and Specialties" of the Moulded Goods variety.[73]

---

[65] "New York Advertisements," *Thompson's Mercantile and Professional Directory* (Baltimore: William Thompson, 1851), 298.
[66] *Documents of the Senate of the State of New-York Sixty-Sixth Session 1843, Vol. III, From No. 71 to 122 Inclusive* (Albany, NY: E. Mack Printer to the Senate, 1843), 87.
[67] *Transactions of the American Institute of the City of New York For the Year 1850.* (Albany, NY: Charles Van Benthuysen Printer to the Legislature, 1851), 50.
[68] *Transactions of the American Institute of the City of New York For the Year 1849* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons & Co., Public Printers, 1850), 53.
[69] Daniel Hodgman, *A pioneer in rubber: a brief history of the career of Daniel Hodgman*,(Hodgman Rubber Company, 1913), 14.
[70] Audley M. Gazam & H. Chas Ulman, eds. *The National Bankruptcy Register: A Record of Law Reports and Proceedings in Bankruptcy in All the States,* Vol. 4, No. 21, Supplement, 170.
[71] Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872 Continued Wisconsin Historical Society, Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 5.
[72] Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872 Continued, Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 14, Folder 5. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
[73] Hodgman, *A Pioneer in Rubber*, 33.

Although Comstock spent a lot of time apprehending sex-toy manufacturers and dealers in New York City, he did not confine himself to this area. As his campaign wore on, he sought sex-toy dealers in other parts of the country. And what better part of the country to go to than the hotbed of rubber manufacturing: Akron, Ohio?

Comstock Heads to Akron

Akron-based companies were prime targets for Comstock because they ran ads in New York-based sporting papers. Known as the rubber capital of the world at the turn of the century, Akron was home to at least a dozen rubber companies**.** Comstock accused Akron companies of shipping millions of sex toys to New York City in the space of "less than a year." Local druggists, whom he also arrested, then sold these. What also irked him was the way retailers in Akron openly flouted the anti-obscenity law, selling sex toys with little compunction. [74]

Although Comstock acted like Akron's rubber industry was solely devoted to producing sex toys, this was not the case. Akron was the "tire capital" of the world, according to Howard and Ralph Wolf.[75] By the early 1900s, many companies that produced sex toys made a significant portion of their money from tires. But Comstock saw the world in black-and-white; in his mind, a company was either a haven for vice or a morally pure enterprise. Destroying thousands of dollars of companies' machinery and sexual products was moral, in his mind, because it was necessary in the name of purifying the country. He was proud of his destruction, bragging about the suicides he had caused and the livelihoods he crushed. Even the way he went about his raids was full of pageantry, dramatically arresting sinners, carrying them away on wagons, burning their wares for all to see. It was a moral war in the name of Christianity that targeted sexual pleasure that framed a dildo as the work of the devil.

---

[74] "Akron Men Seized in Purity Crusade," *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* October 25, 1911, 1 & 4.
[75] Howard & Ralph Wolf, *Rubber*, 431.

In 1903 Comstock swept into the Akron, Ohio, Lyon Rubber Company, arrested President O.S. Lyon, David Armstrong, and four other employees and seized a stock of 180 Old Maid's Delights, 560 ticklers and a large quantity of condoms.[76] An article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* noted that "inspectors destroyed over 45,000 pieces of the manufactured goods in addition to the molds used in manufacturing the same." Comstock spared "the machinery…because it can be used to manufacture other than articles forbidden by the United States laws."[77] Another article said that they managed to destroy $25,000 dollars' worth.[78] The description in the newspaper did not mention that Comstock confiscated sex toys, and instead simply referred to them as "contraband articles."

In a report written later that year, the Secretary of the NYSSV proudly declared that Comstock's raid on the Lyon Rubber Company had netted him a large quantity of "articles for immoral use, especially designed to corrupt young girls and women. We cannot in this report even hint at the uses of some of these things which were designed especially for girls. Imagine the worst and you will not over reach the mark of devilish intent and purpose."[79] Refraining from using the word *dildo* achieved the opposite purpose that the NYSSV intended. Because neither the device nor the use of it is mentioned, the description took on an even greater power, as the reader was implored to "imagine the worst." The NYSSV was particularly upset at their

---

[76] Given the fact that the Old Maid's Delight was placed in a separate category from condoms and that the company also produced other sex toys (ticklers) it is almost guaranteed that Old Maid's Delight was a reference to dildos. "Thirteenth Annual Report of NSSV (Presented March 2, 1904) Ralph Ginzburg Collection Box 13: Folder 8 from Wisconsin Historical Society.
[77] "Six Caught By Comstock. Prominent Akron Men Charged With Violating Law. Arrested, Then Released Under," *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* September 27, 1903, p. 13.
[78] "Comstock Raid at Akron," *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser,* September 29, 1903, p1.
[79] "Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1903 Continued:" Ralph Ginzburg Papers Box 11: Folder Comstock-Heyday 1890-1960 from Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

discovery that the wife of the vice-president of Lyon Rubber Company worked in the factory as "his helpmate in sin."[80] This confirmed their worst fears: women were not only using dildos, but also making them.

In 1911, eight years after the Lyon rubber raid, Comstock came back to Akron to arrest O.G. Lyon again, as well as John Hadfield, owner of Hadfield Rubber Company. Comstock thought that his earlier arrests had driven the sex toy business out of Akron, but the business was too profitable for one raid to end it. Besides, Comstock lived in New York City and was unable to closely monitor the rubber industry in Ohio. On October 25, 1911, Comstock decided to arrest Hadfield in his typical dramatic fashion, by procuring a "sordid police patrol wagon" and rumbling through the town of Akron until he arrived at the Hadfield Rubber Company headquarters and spotted the owner himself. Hadfield refused to enter Comstock's wagon, opting for his own buggy instead. After entering "a plea of not guilty" and "furnish[ing] a $1,000 bond," at the Mayor's suggestion Hadfield promptly destroyed his stock of immoral rubber goods, all 30,000 of them, along with the "4,200 glass molds used in their manufacture." Comstock and the Mayor decided that the dildos and condoms should be ceremoniously "destroyed…in the furnace at city hall."[81] They also agreed that Hadfield would not have to serve jail time because he had gotten rid of his stock.

Four months' and hundreds of entrapment letters later, Comstock returned to Ohio. John Hadfield had returned to selling sex toys. Now he was being tried alongside rubber goods' retailer Benjamin Whitehead in a federal trial in Cleveland. Armed with two enormous suitcases brimming with condoms, dildos and other salacious rubber toys, Comstock convinced the federal

---

[80] "Thirteenth Annual Report of SSV (Presented March 2, 1904)Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Box 13: Folder 8 from Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.
[81] "Comstock Pilots Patrol Cart Raid," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 26, 1911, 5.

officials that Hadfield and Whitehead had violated interstate commerce laws. Newspapers reported that "he presented 34,352 articles to the federal officials" to make his case that the rubber goods were, in fact, filthy and immoral. How that many sex products fit into two suitcases is a mystery. Even though Hadfield and the Whiteheads were convicted and sentenced to prison (four years for the former; three years for the latter), their sentences were suspended and they were ordered to only pay fines because they agreed to destroy their stock of sex toys and leave the business altogether. The Whiteheads were given a smaller fine because they only sold sex toys and did not manufacture them, making them less of a menace to the vice reformers. However, the Judge warned them that if they deigned to reenter the immoral rubber-goods business, they would be thrown back in jail.[82]

Comstock ended the trial by arguing that the national immoral rubber goods business was centered in Akron, Ohio.[83] An article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* indicated how significant these arrests were to him:

> Comstock declared the cases on which he had come to Cleveland of great importance. It is believed that on them hinges the abolishment of a large part of the particular trade which the vice crusaders state is a menace to the future of the country. The business, Comstock said, now centers largely in Akron and he looks for the landing of the telling blow against the social evil in the event of his success there.[84]

The Case of the Vacuum Erection Device

It was not just the rubber industry that so irked Comstock and other post-office enforcers. Although the bulk of sex toys were produced by the rubber industry, non-rubber sex toys were also being produced at this time. One of the most visible of these was the vacuum erection device. These were tube-shaped devices, usually made of glass, that featured a suction apparatus. Men would insert their penises in the open end and pull the mechanism on the other end to create a

---

[82] "Has Many Exhibits for Federal Jury, "*Cleveland Plain Dealer,* February 7, 1912, 3.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

suction. Companies claimed that vacuum erection devices were medical tools that men needed to cure their impotence. In the 21st century we call these devices "penis pumps," and they are sold as masturbation devices and impotence cures. But that did not allow companies to escape prosecution.

Ads for several vacuum erection device companies ran in medical journals, general newspapers, and *The National Police Gazette* through the 1920s. Companies marketed these devices using general health claims in their advertisements, while assuming that consumers knew that *vacuum* was a code word for erection device. For example, an Ajax Vacuum Vitalizer advertisement from 1924 enticed its target market with large bold letters spelling out "MEN," yet it never mentioned impotence or erections. The ad claimed instead that their product would "increase circulation, strength, health and stamina."[85]

Even though the threat of arrest for selling vacuum devices was high, people kept entering the business, possibly because the profit margins were also high. In 1911 Robert Holz patented his "Vacuum Apparatus for Hyperemic Treatments," which was on improvement over other devices because it allowed users to vary the intensity of the suction. Holz advertised his invention in medical journals as "Dr. Bier's Vacuum Cups," probably in the hope that restricting his ads to such journals would give his device medical legitimacy and shield him from vice inquisitors. Although the strategy had sound logic behind it, it did not work. Post office agents spotted his ad and sent him a decoy letter, where they pretended to be a customer ordering a vacuum erection device. When they received the vacuum cups in the mail, they promptly told Holz that his shipping of such devices throughout America was grounds for him to be banned from using the U.S. mails. Holz told the investigators that he would stop producing the devices,

[85] Ad *National Police Gazette*, in April 5, 1924, 14.

while in a letter to free-speech advocate E.B. Foote he said that he would continue to make them, but he would stop shipping them through the mails. "The government does not want any article on the market or sold through the mail that hase [sic] any thing to do with the seamen [sic] in the male or female organs," Holz said. "Now please do not let any get a hold of this letter. But burn it up."[86]

Conclusion

Why does it matter that the Comstock Act caused sex toys to be deeply hidden in American culture and referred to by euphemisms? It matters because it forced sexual knowledge underground. The commercial world is where Americans gained much of their sexual education in the 19th century, either via sex-advice manuals or through advertisements or marketing materials.[87] The less openly sex could be discussed, the less information about sex Americans received. Also, innovation within the sex toy market was stifled, as the risks were too high for "respectable" companies to go into the market with single-use sex-toys like dildos. Instead, companies had to invest in sex toys that were dual-use, like the vaginal syringe, which they still could be prosecuted for. They also had to focus on non-sexual uses in their advertisements, forcing the sexual uses underground, for the user to discover. This created misinformation about sexuality and it created a culture where sexual behavior was full of shame.

Anthony Comstock shaped consumer sex-toy advertising for nearly half a century while he headed up the NYSSV. But notably he did not destroy the industry, nor did he eliminate all sex-toy advertisements. He could not eliminate the sex-goods trade for a number of reasons, some logistic, others deeply human. First, this was a boom time for print media, with new

---

[86] Letter from Robert A. Holz to Dr. E.B. Foote, July 1, 1911, Ralph Ginzburg Papers, MSS862, Box 3, Folder, 15. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison Wisconsin.
[87] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, Chapter 2.

publications sprouting up continuously, particularly in the penny press, which relied upon advertisements for revenue. Since these newspapers needed advertising to survive, they were willing to take risks and accept possibly illegal advertisements. Besides, the risks were not too high because the government simply did not have enough personnel to monitor all of the men's sporting press. Second, rubber companies advertised because multiple companies were manufacturing anal dilators, penis pumps, and dildos, so they had to distinguish their sex toys and condoms from their competitors. Since consumers knew their euphemisms, they were able to be coy in their ads and save the explicit material for their catalogs. Comstock worked around this by entrapment, requesting catalogs using pseudonyms with puns like I. Ketchum. But even with this threat, rubber companies continued to manufacture sex-toys because the industry was lucrative enough that the risk of fines was not enough to dissuade them. However, prison time was more of a threat.

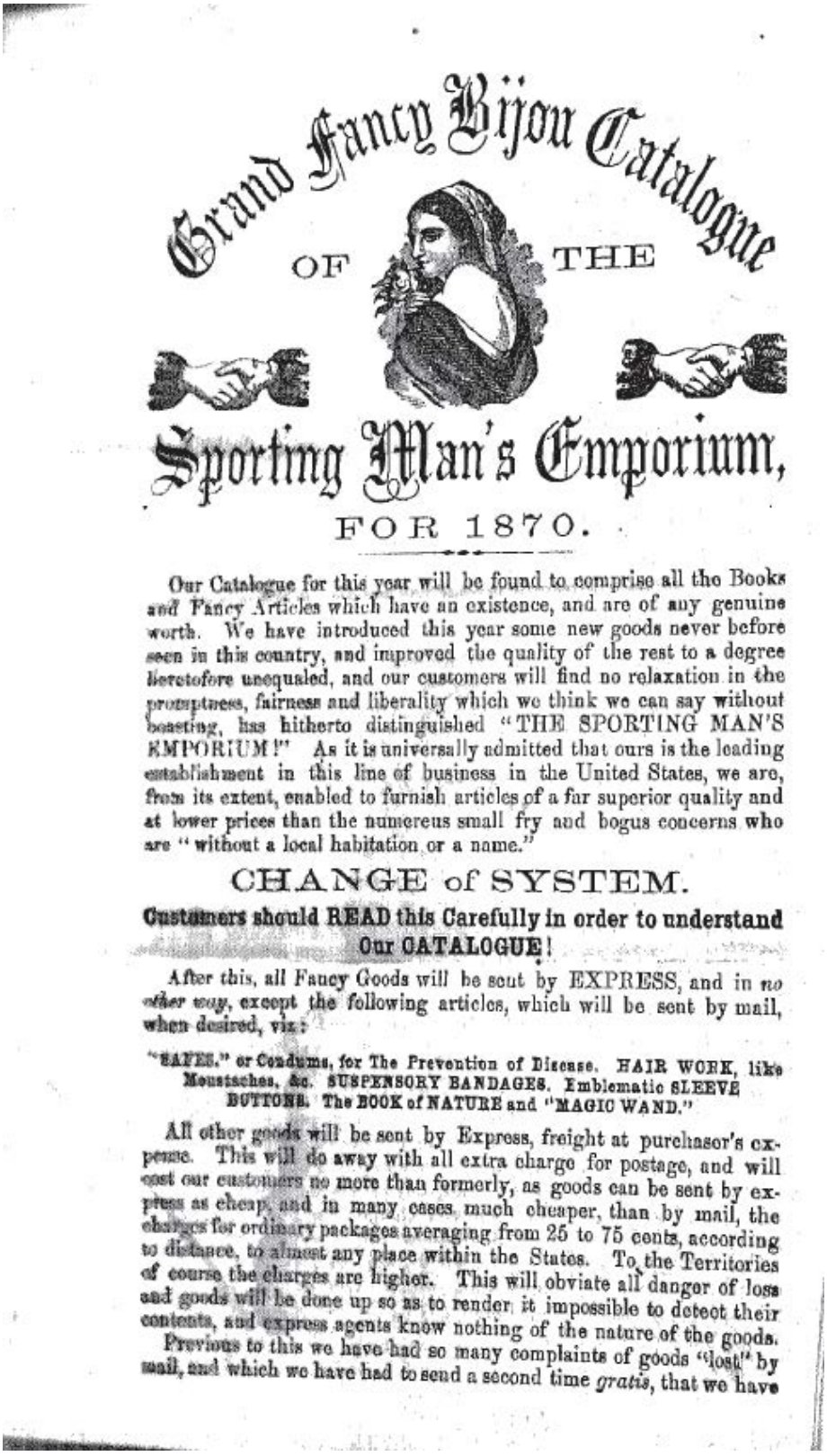
Yet there was a stronger impulse at work here, and that is the sex drive, but it is a particular form of the sex drive. It is sex combined with the human urge to make tools that help us to shape our natural world, controlling and "improving" upon it. The dildo is a threatening object because it is designed to produce sexual pleasure in women without the assistance of men. Sex toys for both genders are threating because they are s a concrete manifestation of the sex impulse, an object that embodies this terrifyingly strong drive. By making visible what is usually painstakingly concealed, expunged from public discourse, the sex toy threatens social order. It tells a story that we tell only in private; it reminds us of the carnality of sex, the clumsiness of the genitals, the ancient animalistic groans of genital pleasure, the sickening sincerity of the body. An object cannot capture sexuality, but all polite society needs is a hint of the dark interior, of the world of desire, and it comes flooding into the visible, a bubbling, gurgling chaos that we

cannot turn from, that we do not want to turn from. So the sex toy naturally produced a visceral reaction in Comstock who wanted to confine sex and sexuality to reproduction.

Comstock also believed that God created us in His image. Given this logic, to create sex toys was to show up God. The sex toy mocked all he stood for. It embodied desire in its crudeness, losing the romance of sex, replacing it with a romance of machinery, reducing sex to a mechanical function, a sex toy simply a tool to fix a flaw in the machine that is the sexual body. It was not until a century later that sex toy companies attempted to recapture the romance of sex and channel it through their consumer goods.

The larger question is why did dildos and other sex toys become popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? In the second chapter it was clear that the vulcanization of rubber created a craze for all number of rubber goods, including sexual ones. So it was partly a story of the hedonism of new materials, becoming so entranced with the novel material of rubber that a certain sensuality oozes from it, a liberty is taken with it, and sexual products are made from it. And physicians played a role in popularizing rubber vaginal dilators because they had a stake in selling their branded dilators and this medical cache lent legitimacy to the use of sexual tools. This medicalization of rubber allowed Sears to have multiple pages of their catalogs devoted to rubber "druggist sundries," without appearing tawdry. But Comstock scrutinized sporting papers and other less legitimate forms of media more closely. They could not hide behind a national brand, so they had to tone their ads down (remove drawings of devices), and describe the sex toys with euphemisms In some ways the consumer of mainstream media had an easier time discovering sex toys than the sporting press reader because the latter had to guess at what an *Old's Maid's Friend* was, while the former was presented with clear drawings that conveyed, however antiseptically, the sexual uses of the rubber devices.

As the 19th century came to a close, the new technology of electricity came to the fore and with it, another new sex toy began to be mass marketed: the electrified vibrator. How companies were able to mass market the vibrator during a time when "articles for masturbation" were illegal is the subject of the next chapter.



Grand Fancy Bijou Catalogue

OF THE

Sporting Man's Emporium,

FOR 1870.

Our Catalogue for this year will be found to comprise all the Books and Fancy Articles which have an existence, and are of any genuine worth. We have introduced this year some new goods never before seen in this country, and improved the quality of the rest to a degree heretofore unequaled, and our customers will find no relaxation in the promptness, fairness and liberality which we think we can say without boasting, has hitherto distinguished "THE SPORTING MAN'S EMPORIUM!" As it is universally admitted that ours is the leading establishment in this line of business in the United States, we are, from its extent, enabled to furnish articles of a far superior quality and at lower prices than the numereus small fry and bogus concerns who are "without a local habitation or a name."

CHANGE of SYSTEM.

Customers should READ this Carefully in order to understand Our CATALOGUE!

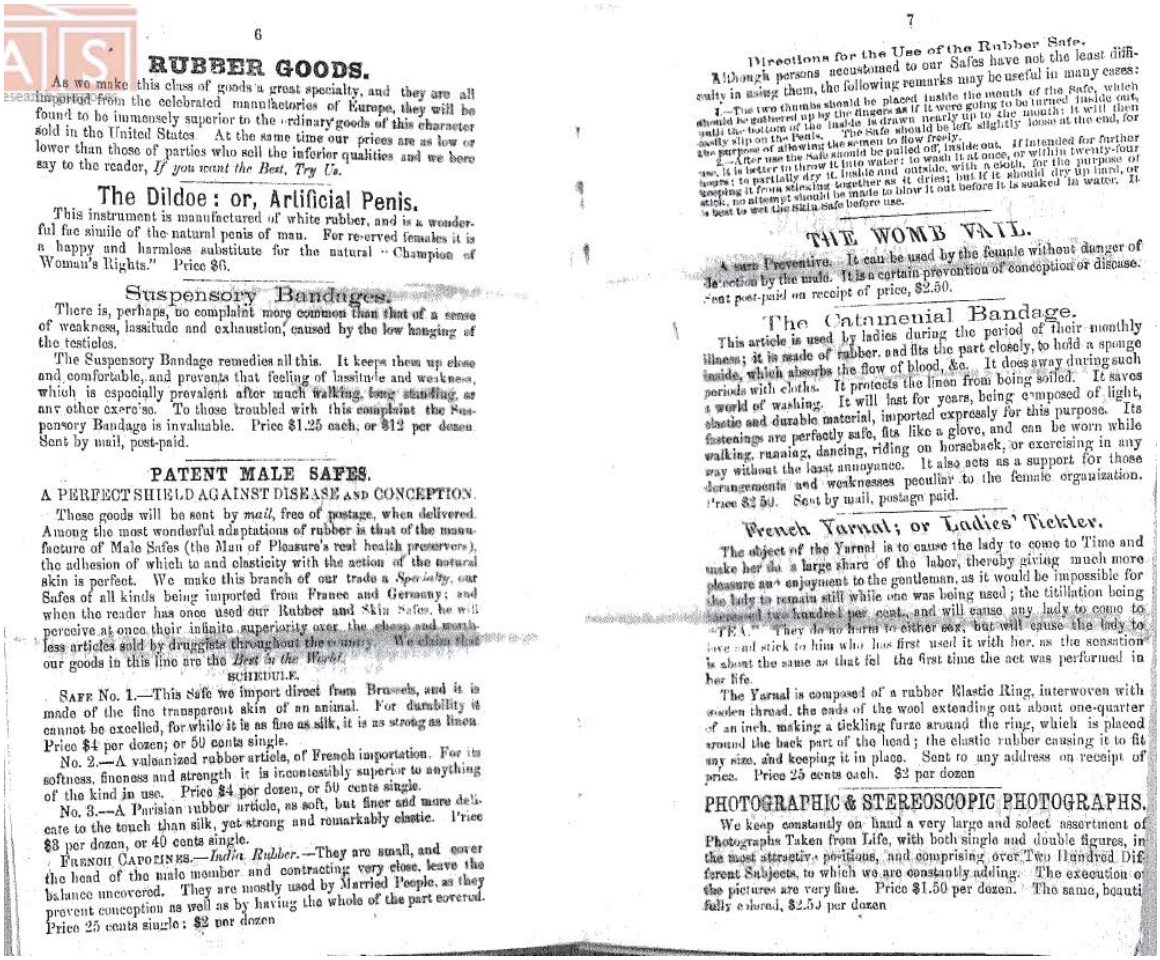
After this, all Fancy Goods will be sent by EXPRESS, and in *no other way*, except the following articles, which will be sent by mail, when desired, viz:

"SAFES." or Condums, for The Prevention of Disease. HAIR WORK, like Moustaches, &c. SUSPENSORY BANDAGES. Emblematic SLEEVE BUTTONS. The BOOK of NATURE and "MAGIC WAND."

All other goods will be sent by Express, freight at purchaser's expense. This will do away with all extra charge for postage, and will cost our customers no more than formerly, as goods can be sent by express as cheap, and in many cases much cheaper, than by mail, the charges for ordinary packages averaging from 25 to 75 cents, according to distance, to almost any place within the States. To the Territories of course the charges are higher. This will obviate all danger of loss and goods will be done up so as to render it impossible to detect their contents, and express agents know nothing of the nature of the goods.

Previous to this we have had so many complaints of goods "lost" by mail, and which we have had to send a second time *gratis*, that we have

Figure 1: Cover of "Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog," 1870.
Source: American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



6

RUBBER GOODS.

As we make this class of goods a great specialty, and they are all imported from the celebrated manufactories of Europe, they will be found to be immensely superior to the ordinary goods of this character sold in the United States. At the same time our prices are as low or lower than those of parties who sell the inferior qualities and we here say to the reader, *If you want the Best, Try Us.*

The Dildoe: or, Artificial Penis.

This instrument is manufactured of white rubber, and is a wonderful fac simile of the natural penis of man. For re-erved females it is a happy and harmless substitute for the natural "Champion of Woman's Rights." Price $6.

Suspensory Bandages.

There is, perhaps, no complaint more common than that of a sense of weakness, lassitude and exhaustion, caused by the low hanging of the testicles.

The Suspensory Bandage remedies all this. It keeps them up close and comfortable, and prevents that feeling of lassitude and weakness, which is especially prevalent after much walking, long standing, or any other exercise. To those troubled with this complaint the Suspensory Bandage is invaluable. Price $1.25 each, or $12 per dozen. Sent by mail, post-paid.

PATENT MALE SAFES.

A PERFECT SHIELD AGAINST DISEASE AND CONCEPTION.

These goods will be sent by *mail*, free of postage, when delivered. Among the most wonderful adaptations of rubber is that of the manufacture of Male Safes (the Man of Pleasure's real health preservers), the adhesion of which to and elasticity with the action of the natural skin is perfect. We make this branch of our trade a *Specialty*, our Safes of all kinds being imported from France and Germany; and when the reader has once used our Rubber and Skin Safes, he will perceive at once their infinite superiority over the cheap and worthless articles sold by druggists throughout the country. We claim that our goods in this line are the *Best in the World.*

SCHEDULE.

SAFE No. 1.—This Safe we import direct from Brussels, and it is made of the fine transparent skin of an animal. For durability it cannot be excelled, for while it is as fine as silk, it is as strong as linen. Price $4 per dozen; or 50 cents single.

No. 2.—A vulcanized rubber article, of French importation. For its softness, fineness and strength it is incontestibly superior to anything of the kind in use. Price $4 per dozen, or 50 cents single.

No. 3.—A Parisian rubber article, as soft, but finer and more delicate to the touch than silk, yet strong and remarkably elastic. Price $3 per dozen, or 40 cents single.

FRENCH CAPOTINES.—*India Rubber.*—They are small, and cover the head of the male member and contracting very close, leave the balance uncovered. They are mostly used by Married People, as they prevent conception as well as by having the whole of the part covered. Price 25 cents single; $2 per dozen.

7

Directions for the Use of the Rubber Safe.

Although persons accustomed to our Safes have not the least difficulty in using them, the following remarks may be useful in many cases:

1.—The two thumbs should be placed inside the mouth of the Safe, which should be gathered up by the fingers as if it were going to be turned inside out, until the bottom of the inside is drawn nearly up to the mouth: it will then easily slip on the Penis. The Safe should be left slightly loose at the end, for the purpose of allowing the semen to flow freely.

2.—After use the Safe should be pulled off, inside out. If intended for further use, it is better to throw it into water; to wash it at once, or within twenty-four hours; to partially dry it, inside and outside, with a cloth, for the purpose of keeping it from sticking together as it dries; but if it should dry up hard, or stick, no attempt should be made to blow it out before it is soaked in water. It is best to wet the Skin Safe before use.

THE WOMB VAIL.

A sure Preventive. It can be used by the female without danger of detection by the male. It is a certain prevention of conception or disease. Sent post-paid on receipt of price, $2.50.

The Catamenial Bandage.

This article is used by ladies during the period of their monthly illness; it is made of rubber, and fits the part closely, to hold a sponge inside, which absorbs the flow of blood, &c. It does away during such periods with cloths. It protects the linen from being soiled. It saves a world of washing. It will last for years, being composed of light, elastic and durable material, imported expressly for this purpose. Its fastenings are perfectly safe, fits like a glove, and can be worn while walking, running, dancing, riding on horseback, or exercising in any way without the least annoyance. It also acts as a support for those derangements and weaknesses peculiar to the female organization. Price $2 50. Sent by mail, postage paid.

French Yarnal; or Ladies' Tickler.

The object of the Yarnal is to cause the lady to come to Time and make her do a large share of the labor, thereby giving much more pleasure and enjoyment to the gentleman, as it would be impossible for the lady to remain still while one was being used; the titillation being increased two hundred per cent., and will cause any lady to come to "TEA." They do no harm to either sex, but will cause the lady to love and stick to him who has first used it with her, as the sensation is about the same as that fel the first time the act was performed in her life.

The Yarnal is composed of a rubber Elastic Ring, interwoven with woolen thread, the ends of the wool extending out about one-quarter of an inch, making a tickling furze around the ring, which is placed around the back part of the head; the elastic rubber causing it to fit any size, and keeping it in place. Sent to any address on receipt of price. Price 25 cents each. $2 per dozen.

PHOTOGRAPHIC & STEREOSCOPIC PHOTOGRAPHS.

We keep constantly on hand a very large and select assortment of Photographs Taken from Life, with both single and double figures, in the most attractive positions, and comprising over Two Hundred Different Subjects, to which we are constantly adding. The execution of the pictures are very fine. Price $1.50 per dozen. The same, beautifully colored, $2.50 per dozen.

Figure 2: Pages 6 and 7 of the "Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog," 1870.
Source: American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Figure 3: Sex-toy Advertisements (located in right column under "Rubber Goods" in *The National Police Gazette* August 26, 1888, 15.

Figure 4: Close up of sex toy advertisement from *The National Police Gazette* August 26, 1888, 15.

Figure 5: Phallic syringes of the type that upset Comstock being sold in the *Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalogue No. 111,* 1902, 456.

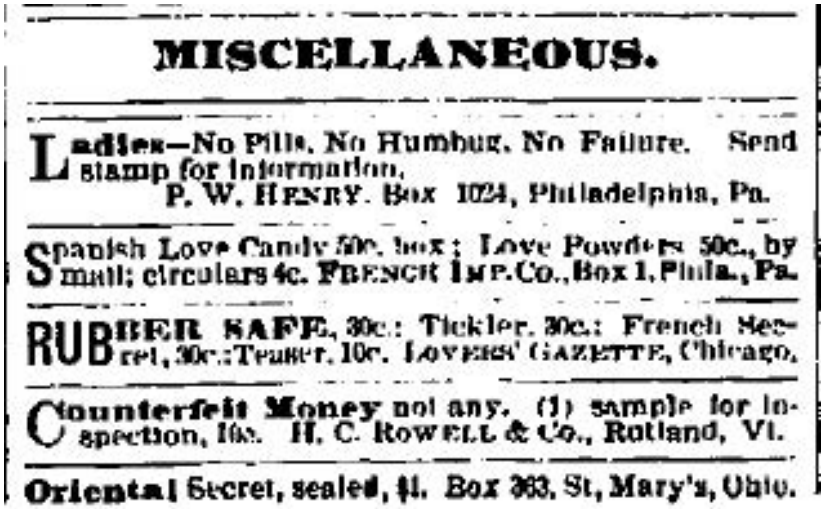


Figure 6: Tickler and condom advertisements. Advertisement in Sept 7, 1889, *The National Police Gazette.*

INDIA-RUBBER GOODS.--THE SUBSCRIBER, manufacturer and dealer, keeps constantly on hand a large stock of

INDIA-RUBBER COATS,

Capes, Pants, Leggins, Gloves, Mittens, Overshoes and Sandals. Also ladies' and gentlemen's

INDIA-RUBBER BOOTS.

Those (of full length) for ladies are a very light and beautiful article, equally adapted to city or country, and are much worn. I would also especially recommend my

INDIA-RUBBER SHEETING,

as an invaluable article for the nursery or sickness A large assortment of Holiday Toys, Piano Covers and Fancy Articles, manufactured from India-Rubber.

D HODGMAN,

d8 4t Warehouse 27 Maiden Lane, corner of Nassau street.

Figure 7: Dildo-manufacturer Daniel Hodgman's ad obscures the sexual goods he sold. Source: *Home Journal,* December 22, 1855.

Daniel Hodgman, Flg 8

MANUFACTURER OF AND DEALER IN

ALL KINDS OF

INDIA RUBBER GOODS,

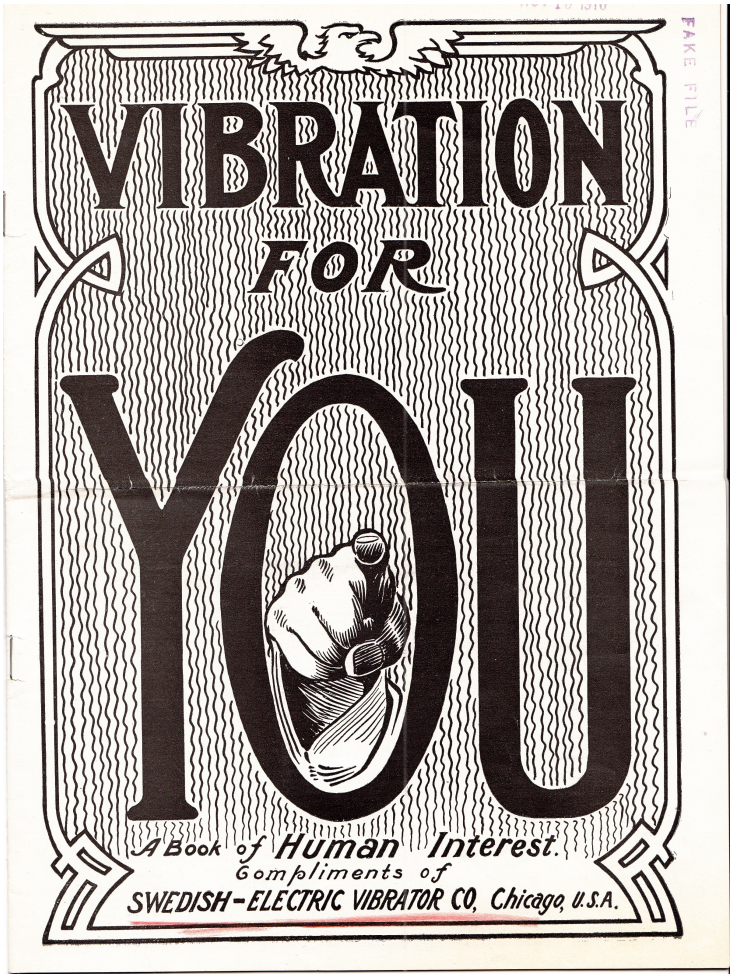
No. 27 Maiden Lane,

NEW YORK.

November 2 thstu3mo

Figure 8: Another Hodgman ad that does not mention his sex toys. Ad ran in December 14, 1865, *Charleston Daily News.* Charleston, South Carolina.

Chapter 5: The Vibrator Arrives



While Anthony Comstock chased after the manufacturers of dildos and ticklers, another sex toy was ensconcing itself in American culture, with barely a notice from vice squads. Unlike the dildo, the vibrator did not look like male genitalia, although some of its attachments did. The vibrator's unassuming design allowed it to slip past the prying eyes of vice inspectors and establish itself in the mass media as a paragon of the shiny technological future, powered by the new technology of electricity and possessing a whirring newly miniaturized motor.

This new technological marvel was everywhere in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Vibrator ads dotted all the major newspapers.[1] Vibrators were displayed in electrical shop-store windows.[2] Sears catalogs featured them.[3] They were sold with suggestive advertising as cure-alls for diseases, including sexual diseases. In lightly coded advertisements these devices were marketed in mainstream magazines and newspapers. In some ways, vibrators were more integrated into American culture in the early 20th century than they are in the 21st. Vibrator advertisements appeared more frequently in mass media during the early 1900s than they do in the 21st. Therefore, the history of the vibrator does not follow a straight line from camouflage to openness, demonstrating that the history of sexuality in America has not followed a trajectory of repression to liberation.

In this chapter, I explain how a masturbation device became ubiquitous during a period of draconian anti-obscenity laws that outlawed "articles for masturbation," and during an era that condemned masturbation as incompatible with healthy sex in marriage.[4] The vibrator succeeded despite societal proscriptions against public discussions of sex because it had both sexual and

---

[1] A search of databases for advertisements from 1900-1930 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune, New York Times,* and *Los Angeles Times* revealed 521 ads for vibrator companies, drugstores selling vibrators, and electric companies and shops promoting vibrators. *Popular Mechanics* ran ads regularly from 1909-1916.

[2] The *McJunkin Electric Supplement* showed such a display in the September 1921 issue, Vol. IV, No. 49, 1, in Dorothy Dignam Papers, box 1, folder 18, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

[3] Sears and Roebuck Company, "Vibrators and Medical Batteries for Electrical and Home Use," Sears Electrical Goods Catalog (c. 1918), 6, in National Museum of American History Library Trade Literature Collection (hereafter NMAH-Trade Lit); Sears Roebuck and Company, Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop "Aids that Every Woman Appreciates" Sears Roebuck and Company, Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop (1918), 4 in Bakken Library and Museum of Electricity in Life Trade Literature Collection (hereafter referred to as Bakken-Trade).

[4] Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 69-74.

non-sexual uses. In other words, the vibrator was a dual-use technology that is, a technology that serves two distinct purposes.[5]

Since the late-19th century, electric vibrators have shared the same basic technology. They used eccentric weights fixed to the shafts of small electric motors of the type that were standard in the small appliance industry of the early 20th century. The rotation of the unbalanced weight produced rapid, intense vibrations in the head of the device, which was typically of nickel-plated steel. These vibrations were transmitted to a wide variety of rubber accessories that were easily attached to the vibrating head by a threaded connector (Fig. 10). Aside the wooden handle, the only part of the vibrator that touched the user's body was the attachment. Most of these vibrators were plug-in models, while some were battery powered.

There are almost no direct historical sources for masturbation practices in this era. No records survive from vibrator companies, while men and women rarely mentioned masturbation, even in their most private writings. As a result, the meanings of vibrators have to be accessed through other sources, such as advertisements and user manuals that came with vibrators, electric company pamphlets and ads, drugstore and department store advertisements, and writings by physicians and moralists.[6] Companies advertised the vibrator as both a laborsaving household appliance and a sexualized panacea, marketing strategies that allowed vibrator ads to slip by the censors, while user manuals clued consumers into specific sexual uses. Electric-companies marketed vibrators in a way that domesticated and feminized electricity. Medical textbooks demonstrate that some doctors knew that patients became sexually aroused when vibrators were

---

[5] William Evan and Bret Hays, "Dual-Use Technology in the Context of the Non-Proliferation Regime," *History and Technology* 22, no. 1, (August 2006): 105-113.

[6] For more on the problems of historic documentation of sex-toy consumers, see Elizabeth Heinemann, *Before Porn Was Legal*: *The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 24.

used on patients' genitals, while moralists' tracts show that they viewed vibrators as a threat to the social order.

I begin by showing how the vibrator's dual-use capabilities were key to its success, allowing it to get past obscenity laws. In the second and third sections, I use advertisements to show how companies strategically employed the vibrator's non-sexual uses to frame the technology as both a small household appliance and an electrotherapeutic device.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, my research on the history of the vibrator is a revision of Rachel Maines' work. Maines uses problematic evidence to support her claim that physicians massaged women's clitorises with the vibrator to treat them for hysteria. According to Maines, doctors did not think of their treatments as sexual because of their androcentric bias, which led them to believe that women only got pleasure from sexual intercourse The evidence does not support Maines' assertions. When doctors used vibrators on patients' genitals for other conditions, they used penetrative phallic attachments, contradicting her claim that the vibrator had social camouflage because it was not used penetratively. [7] There is also evidence that doctors knew vibrators caused sexual pleasure. Finally, vibrators did not lose social camouflage in the 1920s, as Maines' argues, but rather continued to be marketed openly until after World War Two.

Rather than focusing on Maines, I present an alternative explanation for the success of the vibrator. I argue that the vibrator succeeded because it was a dual-use technology, a sex toy that had non-sexual uses, treating conditions like backache, constipation, and sciatica. Vibrator manufactures followed the same strategy as contraceptive companies that escaped prosecution by

---

[7] Noble Murray Eberhart, one of the major proponents of vibratory treatment and one of Maines' principal sources, devotes a mere 43 words to hysteria treatments in his 160-page book, not even hinting treating hysteria by vibrating women's genitals, even though he does recommend using vaginal attachments with vibrators to treat other gynecological conditions. Eberhart, *A Brief Guide to Vibratory Techniques*. Rev. ed. (Chicago: New Medicine Publishing Company, 1913),108.

successfully arguing that their devices had non-contraceptive medical uses.[8] The vibrator's non-sexual uses allowed legitimate companies to manufacture them, electric companies to promote them, and consumers to purchase them without embarrassment or legal restrictions.

The Early History of the Vibrator

British physician J. Mortimer Granville invented the electromechanical vibrator in the early 1880s to treat nervous problems in both men and women.[9] He believed that the body's nerves had natural, healthy levels of vibration, and when these levels got out of balance disease resulted. So he created a device to cure off-key vibrations and restore "the normal harmony of rhythm" of the body's nerves.[10] Granville's writings reveal that he knew the device might have sexual uses. For example, Granville instructed doctors to use vibrators to increase sexual power in their male patients by vibrating the perineum.[11]

Although companies marketed vibrators to doctors, many doctors regarded them with suspicion.[12] In an 1898 letter to the editor of *Medical News*, a physician wrote:

> After many years of vibratory therapy I am now convinced that its value is greatly exaggerated, and depends more on the creation of suggestion than anything else…this form of therapy has become so popular with hypochondriacs that a few years ago a

---

[8] Ezra Heywood, *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood's Defense Before the United States Court in Boston, April 10, 11, and 12, 1883* (Princeton: Free Speech Press, 1883), 17-19;Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 39.

[9] Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 11, 15, 93-94, 98-99.

[10] Joseph Mortimer Granville, "Therapeutics of the Nervous System: Nerve Vibration in the Treatment of Nervous Diseases," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, (March 1883), 172.

[11] He also attributes neurasthenia to masturbation (as well as to railway spine), which leads to a "loss of tone…in the fibres of the spinal cord."(Joseph Mortimer Granville, *Nerve Vibration and Excitation as Agents in the Treatment of Functional Disorder and Organic Disease* (London: J & A Churchill: 1883), 113, 116). Granville suggests curing the weak spinal cord through vibrating it. However, he suggested using it on women in cases of various diseases, including hysteria (Granville, *Nerve Vibration and Excitation,* 80).

[12] Frederick Peterson, "Vibratory Therapeutics," *Medical News,* 29 January 1898, 141.

> company with a large capital was formed here to exploit the 'household' vibrator of which nothing now is heard.[13]

Although his statement about the household vibrator market proved to be incorrect, Hamilton's view of the vibrator as an ineffective device largely represented the medical establishment's attitudes of the time. It was certainly the view of the AMA, which in 1915 said that the "vibrator business is a delusion and a snare. If it has any effect it is psychology."[14]

After the medical community's lukewarm reception of the vibrator in the late 19th century, the vibrator was rebranded as a consumer appliance. The earliest ad for a consumer electric vibrator was an 1899 ad for the Vibratile vibrator in *McClure's* magazine, where the Vibratile was positioned as both a beauty and health device, suitable for "removing wrinkles" and "curing nervous headache."[15] By 1909, Vibratile was joined by at least 20 other companies hawking similar vibrators, including Arnold Vibrator Company, Eureka Vibrator Co., Hygeia Vibratory Co., the Lindstrom Smith Co., and the Swedish Vibrator Co.[16]

---

[13] Allan McLane Hamilton, "Vibratory Therapeutics," *Medical News* February 1898, 248.

[14] Letter from the Journal of the American Medical Association to Adams on 11 February 1915. Historical Health Fraud Collection, American Medical Association Archives, Box 243, File, Lindstrom Smith, Folder 3 (hereafter cited as Health Fraud, AMA). The AMA wrote multiple letters to consumers and doctors, warning them of the inefficacy of White Cross and New Life vibrators. Another letter from the same file (14 September 1916) is to the consumer Mr. F.R. Lawrence, saying the White Cross vibrator book "Health and Beauty" is "false and misleading." A letter from the Hamilton Beach file contains similar criticisms. (Letter from JAMA to Dr. J.M. Donelan, 16 December 1912; Health Fraud-AMA, Box 231, File Hamilton Beach, Folder 3.)

[15] Vibratile Ad, *McClure's,* April 1899, 158.

[16] Arnold Vibrator ads began running in the *New York Times* on May 26, 1908, 5; Eureka Vibrator ads on October 4, 1909; and Swedish Massage Vibrator ads on March 17, 1909. Hygeia Vibratory Co. began running ads in the *Chicago Tribune* on November 16, 1902 and Lindstrom Smith's White Cross Vibrator ads began running in *Health* magazine on December 1907,and in the *Chicago Tribune* on November 4, 1908.

Masturbation Attitudes and Anthony Comstock

Although the vibrator was not an effective treatment for medical problems, it became a successful medically branded appliance nonetheless. Vibrator companies did this by marketing vibrators directly to consumers, selling them both as part of the pseudo-medicine of electrotherapeutics as well as laborsaving appliances.

It seems counterintuitive that vibrators would become successful technologies during a period when masturbation was still considered to be highly problematic. However, this period also represented a shift in the views of masturbation, according to Thomas Laqueur. Masturbation, or "the solitary vice," was still a major concern for moral reformers and physicians around the turn of the 20th century. But most doctors backed away from the 19th-century view that masturbation caused epilepsy, blindness, deafness and even death, and in women, nymphomania and "elongation of the clitoris…and labia minora."[17]

Although public discussions of masturbation were still taboo in the early 20th century (and continue to be in the 21st), attitudes were liberalizing. New research suggested that masturbation "was practiced by all peoples everywhere," and was no longer was solely seen as a sign of moral and societal decay. These researchers defined masturbation "as a subspecies of a universal kind of pure sexuality," a practice whose "moral valence now depended on how one viewed such matters." The major shift in masturbation thought was caused in part by Freud, who argued that masturbation during infancy and childhood was a normal stage that humans passed through but normally abandoned by adulthood. [18]

But 19th-century attitudes endured nevertheless, primarily through legislation that remained in place well into the 20th century. Most important was the so-called Comstock Act,

---

[17] H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., "The Disease of Masturbation: Values and Concepts of the Disease," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48, (Summer 1974): 234-48, 45.
[18] Laqueur, *Solitary Sex,* 66, 68, 69-74.

which even used a 19th century euphemism for sex toys in its title: "Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and *Articles of Immoral Use*."[19]

As I showed in Chapter 3, the Comstock law created problems for manufacturers of dildos and ticklers, but vaginal and rectal dilators aroused less suspicion because they were medical devices.[20] Because a device with both a medical and a sexual use was more difficult to prosecute as immoral under the Comstock law, vibrator manufacturers in the early 1900s relied on the medical uses of the device to avoid prosecution un even though nearly all vibrator companies made phallic attachments.[21] Vibrator companies gambled on the fact that Comstock would be more enticed by the French tickler ads that ran in the back of seedy gentleman's magazines than the vibrator promotions that ran in newspapers and family magazines like *The Youth's Companion*.[22] Although Comstock's main targets were purveyors of single-use devices like dildos, he sometimes coerced newspapers into discontinuing their "massage and electrical advertisements."[23]

---

[19] Text from the 1873 Comstock Act (17 Stat. 599), officially known as "Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," says "that no obscene, lewd, or lascivious, book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or the procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind giving information directly or indirectly…shall be carried in the mail, and any person who shall knowingly deposit [any of these things]… shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor."

[20] "Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872 Continued," Ralph Ginzburg Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Box 14, Folder 5; "Business in the Other Courts," *New York Herald,* July 4, 1873, 6.

[21] Tone, *Devices and Desires,* 17-18, 37-38.

[22] New Life Vibrator featured as "Winner's Gift Number 10-23." *Youth's Companion,* October 17, 1918, 538. Midget Vibrator Ad. *Christian Observer,* January 27, 1909, 24. Vibrator ads also ran in *The Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times.*

[23] "N.Y. World notified by Anthony Comstock to discontinue lottery advertisements; also to be notified to exclude massage, electrical and personal advertisements; also French remedies," *NY*

Selling Vibrators

Despite the hostile legal environment that Comstock had created, by the early 20th century, numerous manufacturers had transformed vibrators into a common consumer appliance. The size of the vibrator industry is difficult to gauge. One way to estimate its size is through advertising. From 1900-1930, the *Chicago Daily Tribune, New York Times,* and *Los Angeles Times* carried 521 ads for vibrators, averaging about 17 ads per year, with spikes in 1908 and 1909, when the *New York Times* ran an average of 48 ads per year. (see Appendix at the end of this chapter)[24] According to the McGraw Electrical Directory, there were 34 vibrator manufacturers in 1909, and the EMF Electrical Yearbook counted 31 vibrator manufacturers in 1921.[25] Some companies, like Hamilton Beach, were major producers of electric home appliances. Although aggregate data on the industry's sales are not available, one manufacturer, Star, reportedly sold 800,000 vibrators in 1921 alone.[26] And Star was not the most popular brand, suggesting annual sales in the millions.[27]

In the first decade of the 20th century, vibrator companies targeted upper class men and women, the customers most likely to be able to afford their products; such customers were also the most likely to have electricity in their households. The average unskilled worker earned less

---

Commercial Advertiser article, n.d., circa 1900. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Box 18, Folder 12.

[24] A search of ProQuest databases for *NYT, CDT,* and *LAT* revealed this information. See the appendix for more detail.

[25] *McGraw Electrical Directory (*New York: McGraw Publishing Co., 1909), 241; *EMF Electrical Yearbook* (Chicago, IL: Electrical Trade Publishing, 1921), 789-790.

[26]"Ingenious 'Helps' Overcome Dealer Inertia," *Printers; Ink*, January 23, 1921: 113-116, 114.

[27] The most popular brands as evidenced by advertising were Arnold Vibrators. Arnold ads represented 45% of *The New York Times* ads for vibrators from 1900-1930 (86 Arnold ads/192 ads total). Only one drugstore ad promoting the Star vibrator appeared in the *New York Times*, but 16 ads in *The Los Angeles* were for drugstores selling Star vibrators, a total of 16% of the ads overall (total ads 103). And drugstores ran ads featuring Star vibrators in 19% of ads for vibrators in *The Chicago Tribune* (27 out of 141).

than $2 per day in 1910, while the average cost of a vibrator was $16, not including special attachments.[28] As David Nye has shown, early adopters often embraced electricity in the home as a form of conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, half of all urban households were still without electricity as late as 1920, so electric appliances, including vibrators, remained unavailable for most working-class families. However, by the 1920s, the average cost of a vibrator had dropped 42% to a little under $10, making them accessible to a wider range of families.[29]

Vibrator companies reached their target market through ads and promotional materials that both communicated and hid the sexual uses of the device.[30] Historians have for some time recognized the importance of advertising in the diffusion of consumer technologies. [31] Like all advertised products, technologies do not inherently contain particular values. Vibrator advertising provided a way for companies to orchestrate the cultural shaping of the technologies they were trying to sell, and thus provides insights into how companies wanted the vibrator to be

---

[28] Average cost of vibrator calculated from advertisements in *Los Angeles Times, Chicago Daily Tribune, and New York Times* from 1900-1919. Annual Wages in the United States Unskilled Labor and Manufacturing Workers, 1774-Present, http://www.measuringworth.com/datasets/uswage/result.php

[29] Average cost of vibrator calculated from advertisements in *Los Angeles Times, Chicago Daily Tribune, and New York Times* from 1920-1930. David Nye, *Electrifying America : Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 147.

[30] Ads for the Hygeia Vibratory Appliance and the Electro-Biohemic and Hermenic Vibrator Cure were openly sexual (in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* respectively), while ads for White Cross Vibrators frequently featured images of phallic stimulators.

[31] Pamela Laird, *Advertising Progress American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*: *A Cultural History of American Advertising* Rev. ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), Chapter 3. John Staudenmaier and Pamela Walker Lurito Laird, "Advertising History: A Survey of Recent Literature, " *Technology and Culture,* 30, No.4, (October 1989): 1031-36.

perceived by the public. A close reading of vibrator ads reveals widely displayed sexual themes over a twenty-year period from around 1906 to the late 1920s.

In the early 20th century, as Laird argues, advertisements shifted from promoting technological progress to spotlighting consumer choice.[32] Vibrator companies' advertising took part in this shift. Vibrator companies used an impressive variety of advertising styles. They placed ads in family newspapers and magazines as well as specialized health publications, solicited celebrity endorsements, and featured their vibrators in films, an early form of product placement.[33] By the late 1940s even the Rural Electrification Administration was promoting them.[34] Companies sold vibrators in every location imaginable: via mail-order catalogs and door-to-door salesmen and women, through drug and department stores, using product demonstrations, and via electrical-goods stores. In fact, most vibrator advertising appeared in ads for shops that carried them, not ads from the vibrator companies themselves. The electric industry, drugstores, and department stores produced 64% of ads featuring vibrators, while vibrator company ads accounted for only 22%, although stores often reprinted vibrator companies' ads in their own promotions. [35]

The closing of the patent medicine era helped create a market for a new health panacea. The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 helped expose patent medicines as simply

---

[32] Laird, *Advertising Progress,* 83.
[33] The 1919 *Bill Henry* starred a popular actor, Charles Ray, who played an electric-vibrator salesman. See Frank H. Lancaster and Ernest F. Birmingham, and Ernest F. Birmingham, "Bill Henry," *Fourth Estate: A Weekly Newspaper for Publishers,* December 18, 1920, 3-4.
[34] "John Oster Manufacturing Co. Demonstrators' Manual," December 18, 1949, Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers 1927-2002, Box 4, Folder 4, "Demonstrator Scripts." National Museum of American History Archives Center.
[35] Data from survey of ads from 1900-1930 in *New York Times, Chicago Daily Tribune, and L.A. Times.* The other ads were for places like hairdressers promoting vibrator treatments. The electric industry produced 29% of vibrator ads, while drug and department stores produced 35% of them. For more details see the appendix.

alcohol- and morphine-filled concoctions, and respectable magazines stopped carrying ads for them. Vibrators were not covered by the 1906 FDA law, and vibrators in a sense became new patent medicines, advertised with similar cure-all claims. Newspapers eagerly accepted vibrator advertisements, especially because newspapers had begun to rely on advertising income rather than circulation revenues for their profitability.[36]

While early 20th century advertisers often used sex to sell nonsexual products, vibrator ads could rarely address sexual uses directly, because it was illegal to sell a masturbatory device.[37] As a result, vibrator companies needed a discrete way to convey sexual purposes without running afoul of the Comstock law. Vibrator companies clued consumers into these sexual uses through ad copy filled with sexually charged words like "quiver," "penetrate," and "stimulate." When this ad copy was paired with sexualized drawings of women, it made the sexual functions of the vibrator clear even to the casual reader. Together, this coded language and sexualized imagery signaled the arrival of a new electrically powered erotic device.

The specifically sexual content of vibrator ads becomes clear when comparing them to the patent medicine ads that preceded them. Taken as a whole, vibrator advertising featured more young, sexy women than patent-medicine ads, which in contrast were more likely to feature matronly women. The most famous female patent medicine company, Lydia Pinkham's, was represented by images of the dowdy, older, buttoned-up Miss Pinkham (fig. 1). In comparison, the woman used to advertise White Cross vibrators was young and scantily clad, exposing her cleavage and holding up one of her breasts (fig. 2). She had a full smile, unlike

---

[36] Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 1992, 3-9.

[37] Sex had permeated American advertising since the 1850s, (Tom Reichert, *Erotic History of Advertising* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003)). Topless women began to appear in ads during the 1870s, and by the early 1900s, soda companies began using images of semi-nude and bare-breasted women.

Pinkham, and she looked sexually available. The vibrator was thus coded as a feminine, youthful appliance. There certainly were some men and older women in vibrator ads, but when companies only featured one image it was almost always of a young woman.[38]

But the vibrator represented more than just a sexual device. Carolyn de la Peña has argued that electrical products symbolized industrial progress in medicine, a meaning reflected in the ads.[39] Carolyn Marvin shows that electrical technologies created considerable unease when first introduced. These fears were exacerbated by electrical devices intended to be applied directly to the body, for example with products like the electric belt. Electric belt companies had to address these "electric fears" in their advertisements. Likewise, vibrator companies had to assuage similar fears, domesticating the device while simultaneously alluding to sexual uses.[40]

Vibrator companies addressed these complex and conflicting goals by relying on the fact that vibrators were dual-use devices, with both sexual and non-sexual uses. Vibrator companies in effect relied on non-sexual uses to align their industry with two major trends of the time: the small-electric appliance and electrotherapeutics. Forty-two percent of ads relied on an small-home appliance approach, while 36% used the electrotherapeutic approach, and 22% used a combination of both approaches.[41] Vibrator companies positioned their devices as electrotherapeutic or household appliances, not just because of the Comstock Act, but because

---

[38] 85% of advertisements featuring illustrations of only one gender using a vibrator chose to use illustrations of young women only (*New York Times, Chicago Tribune, LA Times).* (34 ads featured one gender/29 were of young women only)

[39] Carolyn Thomas de la Peña, *The Body Electric How Strange Machines Built the Modern American* (New York: New York University Press, 2003),110-112. Not all vibrators during this time were electrical. Some were hand-cranked, like the Veedee Vibrator.

[40] De la Peña, *The Body Electric,* 112-114.For more on fears of electricity see Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Chapter 2.

[41] These numbers exclude ads that used no marketing approach, or sold their devices as barbershop vibrators. More on the methodology is available in the appendix.

this strategy allowed them to incorporate their sex toys into pre-established consumer goods categories.

The Vibrator as Household Appliance

In the early 20th century electric appliances were advertised as gleaming tokens of modern technology's ability to reduce the housewife's workload. So why did vibrator companies market sex toys as appliances? They did so in part because, in the doctrine of separate spheres, the home was gendered female, so electric devices for the home were primarily marketed to women. Most of the early vibrator companies were producers of small electric motors, known as universal motors. These motors were easily adapted to a variety of household appliances, including blenders, hairdryers, and vacuums, and thus were already branded as a female technology that could assist the housewife in her chores. The universal motor was able to run on both alternating and direct current, so companies did not have to produce separate versions of their products based on the type of current supplied by the electric utility.[42] AC eventually won out, but in the early 1900s, many households were still supplied by DC systems.[43] When companies sold vibrators containing these universal motors, they simply added the vibrator to newspaper advertisements for their other household appliances, attributing to it the same labor-saving claims that they used to sell vacuums.

By pairing the vibrator with other home appliances in advertisements, companies reduced the sexuality of vibrators, aligning them with chaste housewives instead of immoral women. Through marketing, companies transformed the vibrator, which had begun its life as a sexualized

---

[42] "Good things Come in Small Packages: Racine's Small Motor Industry," Pamphlet from the Racine Heritage Museum, obtained in March 2010. "Hamilton-Beach Company (Racine, Wisconsin)," circa late 20th century, Racine Heritage Museum Archives, Box 338, File 250.
[43] Thomas Hughes, *Networks of Power : Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), Chapter 5.

medical technology, into just another tool for the housewife. Advertisements featured the home-appliance approach more than the electrotherapeutic one, probably because in addition to desexualizing the vibrator, it also added little to companies' advertising costs.

Vibrators were a part of the general trend of introducing technology in the home during the Progressive Era. They were a response to the "servant problem," a term referring to the increasingly scarce, unreliable servants who preferred factory work to domestic labor. In contrast to human servants, appliances were marketed as always dependable "electrical servants."[44] However, because household chores had been the province of low-class, low-paid workers, the introduction of electrical appliances shifted the meaning of housework from a demeaning task to a job respectable enough for the lady of the house.[45] Appliance companies changed the meaning of housework through ads that "treated household tasks as expressions of emotion." [46] The introduction of the electric range and other small household appliances into the home paved the way for electric health devices like the vibrator. Consumers, already used to small appliances, could more easily be persuaded to add another to their collection.

As Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker argued some time ago, technologies have varying meanings for different social groups. These meanings are related in part to how the artifact

---

[44] There were one million in 1870—or "one for every seven or eight households"—increasing in number to 1.7 million in 1920—but not proportionally to the increase in number of households. There was one servant "for every fourteen or fifteen households" in 1920, according to Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *A Social History of American Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 193.

[45] Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother* (New York: Basic Books, 1983),174.

[46] Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1982), 78; see also, Tanis Day, "Capitol-Labor Substitution in the Home," *Technology and Culture* 33, No. 2 (April 1992): 302-327, 307.

solves a problem.[47] For small-motor companies, the vibrator was just another market for their electrical technology. And the easiest and cheapest way to sell vibrators was to fit them into existing marketing strategies for other appliances. So they positioned the vibrator as a laborsaving appliance. The only problem was that vibrators did not save any labor, or at least any labor that could be mentioned in a family newspaper. Housewives were not complaining of massage-induced hand injuries or spending hours massaging themselves or their husbands. Instead of saving domestic labor, marketers were trying to convey the idea that vibrators gave women pleasure, sexual and otherwise.[48]

Manufacturers were not the only social group defining vibrators as necessary home appliances. Electric companies and electric shops pursued a similar strategy in their quest to domesticate electricity and promote its use in the home. Electric utilities sought to increase home electricity consumption by convincing housewives to buy small electrical appliances, in part by hiring home economists to go door-to-door extolling the virtues of blow-dryers and electric stoves. [49] Another strategy was to create electrical shops that featured shiny, beautiful appliances as symbols of modernity. Some of these shops displayed vibrators, including utility magnate Samuel Insull's showroom. Electric companies or electric shops ran 29% of newspaper ads for

---

[47] Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe B. Bijker, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other," *Social Studies of Science* 14, No. 3, (Aug. 1984): 399-341.

[48] My analysis sheds light on Maines' argument about the vibrator as a capital-labor substitution. Maines may have been misled by vibrator companies' labor-saving claims. However, vibrators were advertised as labor-saving primarily to the consumer, not the physician. In any case, little evidence exists that physicians were even using vibrators on their patients' clitorises, let alone fed up with how time-consuming the process was. Many sources that did discuss female diseases, including sexual disorders, advocated the use of penetrative attachment in the vagina, rather than vibration of the clitoris. (Eberhart, *A Brief Guide to Vibratory Technique* & May Cushman Rice, *Electricity in Gynecology* (Chicago: L.I. Laing and Co., 1912), 100-102).

[49] Carolyn M. Goldstein, "From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920-1940," *Technology and Culture* 38, no. 1(1997): 121-152.

vibrators. Vibrators did not represent sexuality to electric companies; they represented the female electricity customer. Electric companies featured vibrators in their pamphlets as just another application of electricity that benefited the housewife. They did not promote vibrators as sexual devices, but they also showed no concern that they were promoting a sex toy.[50]

One artifact from the era exemplifies this small-appliance trope: the Duntley Vacuum Cleaner that also doubled as a vibrator.[51] A 1910 ad in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* trumpets the multiple uses of the Duntley vacuum cleaner, including its use as vibrator. The vacuum cleaner was the epitome of the domestic appliance. For it to come with a vibrator attachment shows how fully the vibrator was accepted as a domestic appliance.[52]

Since small-electric motor companies were so successful at branding vibrators as desexualized, quotidian tools, electric companies could safely promote vibrators in their ads without looking unseemly. Electric companies used vibrators as a rhetorical device to depict the laborsaving properties of their other appliances. A 1925 New York Edison ad in *The New York Times* (fig. 3) illustrates how seamlessly electric companies incorporated vibrators into their strategy of increasing electricity consumption to balance the load. The ad is a paean to "electrical housekeeping" with a happy housewife shown going about her womanly duties with aplomb while using all manner of electrical appliances. Although the ad copy says that "little servants of the home" will bring women "more leisure," many of the images show women hard at work: ironing, washing clothes, and cooking. Depicting the labor saved from using electrical appliances was difficult. For example, even though electric irons supposedly speed up clothes-pressing, the

---

[50] 29% of the ads from 1900-1930 in *The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune,* and *The L.A. Times*. See appendix.

[51] It also had a "lint nozzle…curry comb and brush for cleaning horses…and disinfectant for fumigating purposes."

[52] "Marshall Field and Company. Duntley Vacuum Cleaners Have a Wide Field of Usefulness," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* September 5, 1910, 20.

illustration simply showed a woman ironing the same way that she would have with a non-electric iron. The picture did not make ironing seem faster or more enjoyable. However, by placing the picture next to an illustration of a young woman in a nightdress, massaging her cheek with a vibrator in her boudoir, the vibrator served a rhetorical purpose, implying that the time saved ironing allowed the "electrical housewife" to relax.[53] Unlike the laboriousness of cleaning, to which machinery would provide a welcome respite, self-massage carries no such similar burdens. But the cloak of domesticity shielded vibrators from vice inquisitors. This ad strove to drive women into Edison showrooms to see vibrators and other domestic appliances, while other Edison ads encouraged men and women to install more electrical outlets in their homes to power vibrators and other small appliances. [54]

Similar ads appeared in major mail-order catalogs. A Sears ad described the vibrator as an "Aid That Every Woman Appreciates," simply an adjunct to the home motor (fig. 4). Underneath the title of the ad, a demurely clad housewife, in an ankle-length dress mends clothing with a Sears home motor. Various motor attachments are shown: beater, mixer, buffer, fan, and vibrator. The vibrator was priced similarly to the other appliances; both the vibrator and the household mixer were $5.95.[55]

---

[53] "More Leisure in Electrical Housekeeping," The New York Edison Company advertisement in *The New York Times*, 25 May 1925, 9.
[54] "Additional Electrical Outlets," The New York Edison Company advertisement in *The New York Times,* 13 March 1917, 4.
[55] Sears Roebuck and Company, *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop* "Aids that Every Woman Appreciates" Sears Roebuck and Company, *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop* (1918), 4 in Bakken Library and Museum of Electricity in Life Trade Literature Collection (hereafter referred to as Bakken-Trade)."Hamilton Beach Electric Labor Savers" ad from *United Commercial Travelers 1920 Convention Souvenir Book*. Ref #183.02- Racine County history, 250H. Racine Heritage Museum Archives.

The design of vibrator attachments and details in consumer manuals on inserting vibrator attachments into the vagina demonstrate that manufacturers intended vibrators for use on sexual organs. However, because vibrators did have nonsexual uses, these ads could also play down the sexual uses of vibrators. Therefore, the ads succeeded in both conveying sexuality while also maintaining a sense of propriety.

Medical Appliance

When companies marketed vibrators as small home appliances their sexuality was muted. The goal was to disguise the vibrator as another innocuous appliance, not highlight its sensuality. But when companies sold vibrators as medical appliances, sexual uses could be hinted at so long as they were given a sheen of medical legitimacy. That is where the dual uses of the vibrator became especially important. A single-use sex toy like the dildo was difficult to disguise as a medical device.[56] Vibrator companies, however, could claim, without being wildly dishonest, that their consumers were purchasing sex toys to treat sciatica.[57]

The vibrator was a part of the electrotherapeutic industry that included electric batteries, violet rays and other electrified health goods. Companies latched their technology onto the electrotherapeutic industry, an industry that traded on the magical and miraculous mystique that

---

[56] Using medical claims came with a different set of problems, however. The American Medical Association attacked vibrator manufacturers in the early 1900s, called them quacks, and attempted to educate consumers about the false claims of companies.

[57] Marketing devices as panaceas was common during the turn of the 20th century. Many diseases were believed to be related to a malfunction of the nervous system, so a device that soothed the nerves could hypothetically "cure" hundreds of diseases. For more on American mass media and conceptions of the body in vernacular culture in the during the turn of the century, see Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, Chapter 2. For more on why electricity was used to stimulate nerves and cure disease see de la Peña, *The Body Electric*, Chapter 3; Keith Wailoo, *Drawing Blood, Technology and Disease Identity in Twentieth-Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), Chapter 1, and Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter*, Cultures of Neurasthenia: From Beard to the First World War* (Amsterdam and New York: Wellcome Series in the History of Medicine, 2001), Chapter 2.

electricity had in culture. As Nye explains, "Electricity…was a mysterious power Americans had long connected to magnetism, the nervous system, heat, power, lightning, sex, health, and light."[58] Electricity had such cachet that it was used to sell products such as patent medicines ("electric bitters") and non-electrified household goods ("electric hairbrushes").[59] Vibrator companies positioned their devices as appliances that harnessed the power of electricity, bringing the vital forces directly to consumers. They tied the vibrator to medical claims that asserted that electricity and electrical appliances could provide the body with positive energy that would "push out disease and death," while "driving power directly into the nerves and muscles, leaving the body with more reserve force as a result." [60]

But it was not just electricity that companies tried to push to vibrator consumers; vibrator ads also conveyed information about the sexual possibilities inherent in the device. That companies were promoting vibrators to treat back pain and sore limbs in the early 20th century is easy to believe. But the idea that companies were marketing vibrators for female masturbation is more difficult to accept, which explains the plausibility of Maines' argument that vibrators were camouflaged due to a misunderstanding of women's sexuality. Although Michel Foucault, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz and Estelle Freidman have all dismantled the myth of the sexually repressed Victorian woman, the myth persists. Their work, as well as research on women's sexuality during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, shows that some women actively sought sexual pleasure and orgasm.[61] Historian Tanfer Emin Tunc who analyses early 20th century sex

---

[58] David Nye, *Electrifying America,* x.
[59] They ran ads with claims such as this: "Vibratory massage acts like magic. It wakes up every cell in your body," Arnold vibrator ad from the *New York Tribune*, 14 October 1913, sec. A.
[60] de la Peña, *The Body Electric.* 9.
[61] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality The History of Sexuality, Volume 1.* Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). Horowitz, *Rereading Sex;* John D'Emilio and Estelle

surveys, argues that middle-class white women accepted "sex as a source of mutual necessity, pleasure, love, and procreation." Tunc details Katherine Davis' landmark 1929 study on American women's sex lives, which found that forty percent admitted to having masturbated before marriage.[62]

Even though some women sought out orgasm, laws and societal pressure made marketing vibrators as sex toys risky. Companies had a choice: they could focus on sexual uses in their ads and hope that Comstock did not go after them, or they could spotlight non-sexual uses in their ads, but convey the erotic nature of the devices through other means.[63] However, some explicitly sexual vibrator ads existed, notably ads that targeted men. Such ads fit into the trend of sexualized advertising for male anti-impotence devices like electric belts. One example is the Health Appliance Company's Electric-Biochemic and Hermenic Vibrator Cure, which the company marketed as "A Cure for Weak Men." This vacuum and vibration device looked very similar to the 21st century "penis pump." With its cylindrical shape, perfectly sized for housing a penis, this device appeared to have one use only. The Health Appliance Co. tried to stave off legal action by providing a list of possible non-sexual uses for its device, claiming that it "restored circulation and stimulated the action of the stomach, liver, heart, kidneys and bowels," cured "female diseases" and removed wrinkles.[64] But the primary use was as an impotence cure,

---

Freedman, *An Intimate History of Sexuality: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

[62] Tanfer Emin Tunc, "Talking Sex: Deciphering Dialogues of American Female Sexuality in the Mosher Survey, 1892-1920," *Journal of Women's History* 22 no.1 (2010).
Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

[63] The vibrator was also marketed for nonsexual diseases of the nervous system, including neurasthenia, hysteria, and chlorosis. On chlorosis see: Wailoo, *Drawing Blood*, Chapter 1.

[64] Health Appliance Company Electric-Biochemic and Hermenic Vibrator Cure Ad. *Los Angeles Times,* 15 September 1902, 14. This ad ran 6 times in the *LA Times* from September 15-20, 1902

which is what "a cure for weak men" meant.[65] Yet efforts to re-brand the vacuum device as a chaste health apparatus failed, and the Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department issued a fraud order on August 30, 1904. So the owner of the company, C. Backus, teamed up with other vacuum device manufacturers and renamed his business Vacuum and Vibration Company, a ploy that also failed, resulting in more fraud orders against the company, as well as an arrest of one of its founders.[66]

Some companies marketed their vibrators as both single-use and dual-use devices. The comparison of both of their types of ads can show how such strategies were strategically employed. The Hygeia Vibratory Co. boldly advertised their vibrating belt with phallic attachment as a "Sexual Vibrator for Men and Women" in a December 1903 edition of *Health* magazine but called a similar device a "vibratory appliance" in a 1902 *Chicago Daily Tribune* ad (fig. 5). [67] In the *Health* magazine ad, Hygeia featured an illustration of the phallic device, with claims that the device would restore "nerve tone" and increase "vital power."[68] It is unclear why Hygeia took the risk to run an openly sexual ad in *Health*. Perhaps they thought that the magazine's focus on "physiology, pathology, hydropathy, and physical, moral, and intellectual

---

[65] McLaren, *Impotence,* all of Chapter 6, particularly 136.

[66] "The Vacuum Appliance Company," Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department, 17 March 1905, and "Vacuum Medical Company," Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General, 23 September 1905, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789-2011, Office of Post and Office of Solicitor, RG 28, Box 27, FOCF, National Archives. See also, letter from Robert A Holz to E.. Foote, July 1, 1911. Ralph Ginzburg Collection, Box 3, Folder 13, Wisconsin Historical Society.

[67] Hygeia Vibratory Co. ad, *Health* magazine 31 December 1903. Granted the belt was a different device than the electromechanical vibrators sold by other companies, but Hygeia was using the term "vibrator" to describe it.

[68] *Health* was a somewhat controversial consumer health periodical formally known as the *Water-Cure Journal.* It then changed its name to *Herald of Health* in 1893 and finally *Health* in 1900, a name it kept until its demise in 1910.(Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, *1741-1930*, vol. 1 (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968, 316)).

development" shielded it from vice-inquisitors' eyes.[69] Yet Hygeia's 1902 ad in the *Chicago Tribune* was less explicitly sexual. Instead of marketing their "Style 'C' Vibrator," they promoted their "Style 'A'" vibrator that did not have a phallic shape. However, sexual themes also appeared in the *Tribune* ad, but they were relegated to the small print, which noted "the secretion of glands is increased."[70] Most of the ad was filled with claims that the Hygeia treated diseases, like paralysis, rheumatism. and neurasthenia, claims left out of the *Health* ad. By including such claims, Hygeia classified their vibrator as primarily a non-sexual medical device, obscuring its sexual uses.

Hygeia's ad copy was nearly identical to that of vibrator companies that sold their devices as cure-alls. Their ads provide strong evidence that vague health claims for vibrators were often veiled sexual assertions. For example, Hygeia's ad copy shows striking similarities to that of the Better Health Vibrator. "Waves of health are sent speeding through the system…the blood courses more swiftly through the veins," according to the Hygeia ad, while the Better Health Vibrator similarly promised to, "Send the blood tingling and surging thru your veins—know the joys of health."[71]

No other company was as explicit as Hygeia. Instead, the main strategy vibrator companies used to convey the sexual uses of their devices was to combine erotic imagery with

---

[69] Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 441.
[70] In other ads for their sexual vibrators, Hygeia used the phrase "secretion of the glands is increased." See, ad in *Suggestion*, Vol. 10, 1903, 284. The full phrase used was usually "organs of secretion and excretion" and also covered the anus, see: "Mental Activity Physical Activity" Hygeia Vibratory Appliance Advertisement. *Chicago Daily Tribune.* 6 November 1902, 14.
[71] Better Health Vibrator Co. ad, *The Independent*, 23 March 1914, 426.

sexualized language. Of the few ads featuring illustrations, nearly half of them had sexual themes, including sexy women or instructions for users to vibrator their breasts.[72]

One example is a 1908 ad for the White Cross vibrator (fig. 6). A woman is shown reclining in bed, presumably nude under the blanket, implying sexual availability. A heading "Health for Men" appears above the drawing. Juxtaposed with the image of a naked woman lying in bed, the meaning is clear. Vibrator ads could not show the young woman masturbating or seducing a man, but they could imply both.[73]

Vibrator companies were masters of sexual innuendo. A 1909 *Chicago Daily Tribune* ad featured a drawing of a busty woman in a low-cut dress next to the headline, "Is Your Body Poorly Developed?" (fig. 7) The copy makes no overt claims that vibrators will increase breast size, but it is full of implications, including claims that the vibrator will help women to become "symmetrically molded" and develop "your body as beautifully as nature intended."[74]

Sometimes companies went further and suggested using vibrators to massage breasts, but they shied away from advocating genital massage. "For the bust, which should be full and rounded and vigorous looking, but is inclined to be lank and flabby, nothing equals 'Try New-Life,' which is really massage applied by the latest scientific principles," said a Hamilton Beach ad.[75] Monarch vibrator ads claimed their devices would "develop fullness of neck and bust, arms

---

[72] The data comes from ads running from 1900-1930 in *CDT, NYT, and LAT* that contained illustrations of people (62 out of 521 ads total).
[73] White Cross Vibrator Ad *Health* 31 December 1908, 258.
[74] Arnold Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* 28 March 1909, B9. This woman showed up in many of the Arnold company's advertisements. See, *CDT,* 9 May 1909, 7.
[75] Hamilton Beach Ad, 4 May 1913, *Salt Lake City Tribune,* 5.This is one of many, many similar ads. Another *Chicago Tribune* Arnold ad instructed women to massage their busts with the vibrator (16 May 1909). Seven *Los Angeles Times* ads and 3 *New York Times* vibrator ads from 1900-1930 featured similar bust-development claims.

or any deficient part."[76] The Arnold Vibrator Company instructed women to vibrate their busts by featuring an image of a women in a low-cut dress with the caption "Vibratory massage for the face, neck, and bust." The usual list of endless ailments cured by the vibrator is listed—"lumbago, heart disease, eye trouble," etc.—but only one "disease" is featured in bold, the disease of "bust development." [77]

Advertisers frequently paired sexualized images with desexualized text. In a 1908 ad, the highly sexual image of a naked, prone woman was accompanied by medical claims; its most suggestive language stated that "It strengthens your nerves and thrills your whole body" (fig. 6).[78] But another White Cross ad with a less sexualized image, just a pretty young woman coyly smiling while vibrating her face, had more suggestive language. "*All the keen relish, the pleasures of youth,* fairly throb within you," said the ad, next to "Every organ is put in *perfect working order*." The sexual innuendo was clear enough to attract the potential sex-toy user, but not too overt to attract Comstock or turn off the non-sexual user. Even more explicitly sexual information was in White Cross's *Health and Beauty* pamphlet that they promoted in their ads.[79]

Another technique advertisers used to sexualize the vibrator while avoiding censorship was by eroticizing chaste diseases by advocating sexual treatments for all manner of common ailments. This allowed them to convey more erotic details while still maintaining the façade that a vibrator was a legitimate medical device. Necessity caused this flourishing of multiple, and sometimes bizarre, sexual discourses in their advertising. Asthma, backache, baldness, fatigue, indigestion, and obesity were all transformed from ordinary diseases into sexual problems to

---

[76] Monarch ad from *Health* magazine, 31 December 1908, 50.
[77] Arnold Massage Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune,* 16 May 1909, H3.
[78] White Cross Vibrator Ad *Health Magazine* December 31, 1908.
[79] White Cross Vibrator Ad, *Heath* magazine, September, 1912, 210. Italics in original.

communicate the vibrator's sexual uses to potential customers. Draconian anti-obscenity laws forced early 20th-century vibrator companies to imbue nonsexual diseases with sexual power.

A 1912 Hamilton Beach ad illustrates how companies deployed this strategy visually. In addition to its image of a sexy woman curing her indigestion (fig. 13), the ad also featured a drawing of another young woman in lingerie cinched at her tiny waist. She is grasping a vibrator in one hand, while holding its plug with the other, tracing a phallic shape with cord and device. Pressing the vibrator up to her throat, she tilts her head and gives a sideways glance to the reader, daring him or her to experience this exquisite pleasure, as the text underneath her read "Healing a Sore Throat."

Thus a non-sexual disease was sexualized through imagery.[80] Another Hamilton Beach ad, this one from 1914, featured the headline, "Rheumatism: the Most Painful of Diseases, Yields to 'Try New Life'" (fig 8). But the images featured two young women who clearly are not suffering from arthritis, and only one older woman. The young women are highly sexualized, one with her legs spread and the other in a low-cut dress.[81]

This language was never fully erotic, not just because of anti-obscenity laws. As Foucault noted about the Victorian era, even as sexual discourses permeated culture, "there was an expurgation… of the authorized vocabulary" of sex.[82] This expurgation of direct language helps explain why euphemisms abounded in vibrator ads, with appeals to health and beauty displacing claims of sexual pleasure.

Sexual uses of vibrators were also conveyed by the brochures and books that the newspaper ads implored customers to send for. These books almost always featured illustrations

---

[80] Hamilton Beach's New Life Vibrator Ad, 26 November 1912, *The Des Moines News*, 8.
[81] Hamilton Beach New Life Vibrator Ad; 4 May 1913 *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3
[82] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 17.

and discussions of penis-shaped insertable attachments. Rectal and vaginal attachments were produced for nearly all of the turn-of-the-century vibrators, in both physician and consumer models.[83] In fact, physicians' vibrators almost always came with rectal and vaginal attachments. One of the most popular models, the Shelton (marketed to doctors from 1906-1925) had a carrying case designed to fit its multiple phallic attachments, clearly visible on the right (fig. 9).

Vibrator companies sometimes illustrated their phallic attachments in newspaper and magazine ads, but they only described their use in books. White Cross frequently showed a phallic attachment in its *Popular Mechanics* ads (fig. 10), which also ran in *The Chicago Tribune*. Both a rectal dilator attachment (left middle) and a soft rubber vaginal applicator (upper right) are shown. White Cross ran ads with a phallic attachment in over a third of the issues of *Popular Mechanics* from 1909-1916. Like a good child, the rectal and vaginal attachments were seen but not heard, pictured in a tableau but not mentioned. Phallic attachments often stood out in the ads because they were usually larger than the other pictured attachments.[84]

---

[83] Many of the companies that offered free or cheap booklets via mail order include the following: Arnold Vibrator Co. featured a "Health and Beauty" book, see ad in *Chicago Daily Tribune* 9 May 1909, 7. Hamilton Beach offered a book for the New-Life Vibrator called "Health and How to Get It," see *The Evening Standard* (Ogden, Utah), 24 August 1913, 16. White Cross Produced a *Health and Beauty* book, featured in many ads. See, 31 December 1908 ad "Vibration Routs Disease" in *Health,* 258. Better Health Vibrator offered a free booklet. See *The Independent,* 23 March 1914, 426. Eureka Vibrator offered a free "Health and Beauty" booklet too. See *Health* magazine April 1909, 200. This fact undermines Maines' central argument that vibrators achieved social camouflage because they weren't penetrative (Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm,* 10).

[84]White Cross Electric Vibrator ad, *Popular Mechanics,* December 1913, Advertising Section, 171. Ads featuring images of the phallic attachments showed up 38 times in *Popular Mechanics* from 1909-1916: Feb-May and July 1909; March-April and Nov-De c1910; Jan-April and Oct-Dec 1911; March 1912; Jan-Feb, April-June, and Oct-Dec 1913; Jan-April, Sept, Oct 1914;Jan-May, Sept, Oct, Dec 1915; Jan ,March and April 1916,; March, April, Sep-Dec 1917. The *Chicago Tribune Ads* were run four times from 1911-1916. Hamilton Beach, "New Life Catalog," circa 1915, 15; Hamilton Beach Price List, 1926, 3.

In contrast to this reticence in ads, White Cross's 1911 *Health and Beauty* pamphlet described the use of their phallic attachments in detail:

> Sexual neurasthenia, impotence, and prostatitis may also be treated by vibration either alone or in connection with electricity. For the treatment of which employ the rectal vibratode for five minutes or so, using the minimum stroke and a fairly rapid speed, taking care that the treatment be not too prolonged.[85]

The pamphlet also included an image of the White Cross Girl using a bust-enhancing cup with a suggestive look on her face and her left hand situated near her crotch (fig.11).[86]

Even though White Cross offered many sexual attachments for their vibrators, they usually did not come standard with the device. This was another way of concealing the sexual uses of vibrators.[87] By requiring consumers to send away for bust-enhancing cups, as well as rectal and vaginal attachments, companies were able to keep alive the myth that the vibrator was not a sex toy, while making a lot of money in the process, as these were the most expensive attachments offered. Vibrator companies assumed that consumers would pay premiums for sexual attachments. For example, in 1916 Lindstrom Smith charged around 40 cents for their nonsexual attachments, yet the rectal attachment was $1.25, the bust attachment $1.50, and the vaginal attachment $2.[88]

Hamilton Beach also discussed penis-shaped attachments in their 300-page book for their New Life Vibrator, *Health and How to Get It*. Not only did the company mention how to use a rectal phallic attachment, but it also claimed that inserting a phallus into the anus was a cure for

---

[85] "Health & Beauty," White Cross Vibrator Catalog, 1911, 8.
[86] Lindstrom Smith *Health and Beauty* pamphlet, advertisements for the White Cross Vibrator; 12 January 1911, Health Fraud, AMA, Box 243, File Lindstrom Smith.
[87] Recent studies have shown that women commonly insert vibrators in their vaginas. See "Women's Vibrator Use in Sexual Partnerships: Results from a Nationally Representative Survey in the United States," Herbenick, et. al. 2010. 73.4% of women surveyed had inserted vibrators in their vaginas for masturbation (Herbenick, et al., 3311)
[88] Lindstrom-Smith White Cross Vibrator Catalog, *Health and Beauty,* 1916, 60. Health Fraud-AMA, Box 243, File Lindstrom Smith. See also, Illinois Electric Company, *Westinghouse Agent-Jobber Catalog,* No. 58, 492 in NMAH-Trade Literature Collection.

impotence (see image of phallic attachment from their vibrator manual in fig.12). For women, the hysteria chapter gave less detailed, but clearly sexual instructions: "Hysteria is related most intimately and peculiarly with the sexual organs of women…Naturally, then, the cure of hysteria presupposed the cure of whatever has caused it." [89] However, after being so forthright, Hamilton Beach backed off and suggested sufferers treat the spine, then move onto the "paralyzed and contorted muscles," reminding women that "the disease is sure to manifest itself in some part of the body more decidedly than elsewhere—treat the nerves and muscles of this part."[90]

This two-step marketing process, ads followed by booklets, reflected the dual-use nature of the vibrator. This process served the needs both of consumers purchasing vibrators for non-sexual uses and of those purchasing the vibrator for masturbation. Nonsexual users could believe that the vibrator really was a face massager, while more adventurous users could legally buy a device for sexual pleasure.

Vibrator and Sexual Pleasure

Although the sexual nature of the vibrator was rarely explicitly discussed, an occasional reference does show that its sexual use was hardly a secret. Physicians and moralists were worried about the vibrator's ability to simulate masturbation in men and women. A 1912 men's sexual advice book, *Himself: Talks With Men Concerning Himself* warned of the dangers of vibrators. "Various electric vibrators have been abused by the unscrupulous… to give men vibratory massage of the generative organs.…The effect of this treatment is to give a sensation similar to that of masturbation." [91]

---

[89] Charles Lee Bryson, ed. *Health and How to Get It* (Racine: Hamilton Beach Manufacturing Company, 1927), 209.
[90] Bryson, *Health*, 204.
[91] Edith Belle Lowry and Richard Jay Lambert, *Himself: Talks With Men Concerning Himself* (Chicago: Forbes and Company, 1912), 67-68.

And in 1938, another doctor, Edwin Hirsh, described his concerns about women using vibrators in his sex-advice book *The Power to Love*. "Vaginal-uterine masturbation is a practice supposedly confined to the women of Oriental countries, but, as I shall soon show, it is indulged in by women of the Occident as well." Western women do the same thing, except with different tools. "The substitute method used in this country, though it is employed under the guise of medical treatment, is the use of the vaginal vibrator or high-frequency electrode." Both of these devices came with similar attachments, which looked like "erect phalluses." Hirsch explicitly described the vibrator's camouflage as a medical device. "Ostensibly, the treatment is for erosion of the cervix, cervicitis, enocervicitis, and what not, but the hidden purpose in innumerable cases is for the masturbatory action and the resulting voluptuous sensations."[92] Hirsch's description of vibrator use shows that the vibrator's medical camouflage continued in spite of the fact that they mimicked sexual intercourse:

> Electrical vibrators…cause the uterus to be vibrated by a very fine oscillatory motion which brings about an intense venereal spasm. Many frigid women obtain their gratification by these commercial devices so that when their husbands attempt to arouse them, he finds that coitus at best is nothing but a lifeless process.[93]

Hirsch's quote shows that the vibrator was viewed as a threat to the androcentric culture not, as Maines argues, an extension of it. Vibrators managed to retain camouflage as medical devices not because their use was unlike intercourse, but in spite of the fact that they mimicked intercourse.

Conclusion

The first successful mass-marketed sex toy emerged during a time of legal and social repression of sexuality, thus demonstrating that advertising can shape a technology's meaning

---

[92] Edwin Hirsch, *The Power to Love* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1938), 140.
[93] Hirsch, *Power to Love,* 141.

and determine whether it is adopted on a large scale. If companies had openly marketed the vibrator as a masturbation tool, it would not have succeeded. Although the market for a masturbation device clearly existed, a sex toy could only have been sold by subsuming its sexual uses under a non-sexual category of consumer goods. Because it was a dual-use device, the vibrator was amorphous enough to allow companies to fold it into the electrotherapeutic and small appliance industries. This strategy allowed vibrator companies to plaster newspapers and magazines with large-format sex-toy ads in an era when sex toys and the ads for them were illegal.

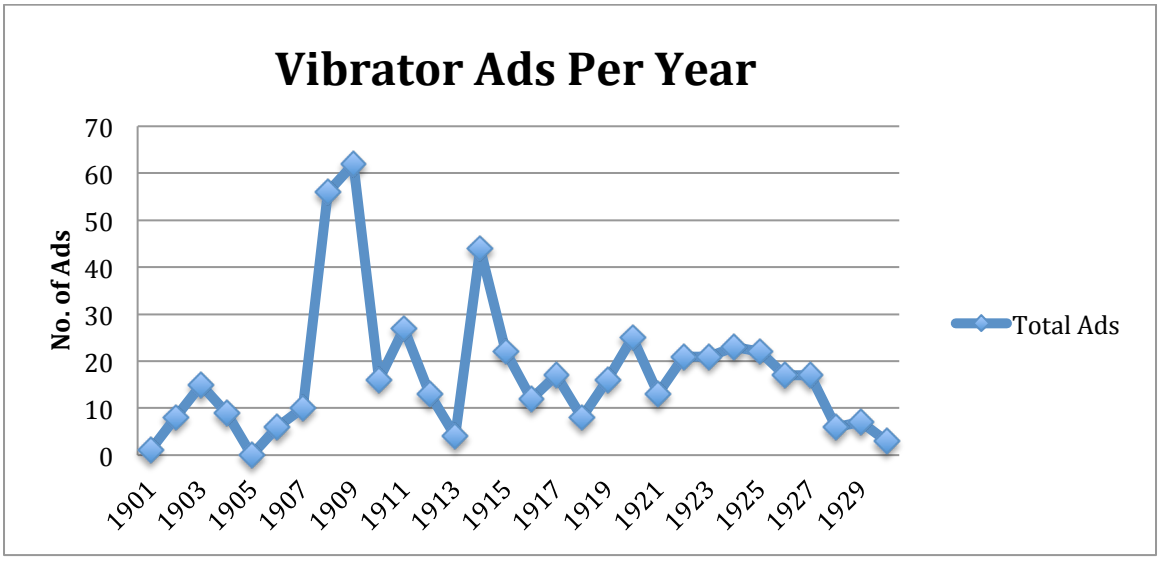
Companies continued to advertise their vibrators as medical devices and small-home appliances throughout the 30s, 40s, and 50s, frequently using illustrations of partially clothed models to do so.[94] The vibrators sold as sex toys were similar to those sold in the early 1900s; they used the same eccentric-weight technology. However, many of the sex-toy vibrators were battery-powered and clearly shaped like phalluses. Euphemisms dominated the marketing of vibrators until they began to be sold as sex toys in the 1960s. Paradoxically, when the vibrator was sold as a single-use device, it became less visible in American culture. Ads were relegated to niche magazines and the technology regressed. In contrast to the older dual-use vibrators, single-use vibrators were made of shoddy materials and sold without guarantees.[95] So it should come as no surprise that when feminists decided to turn a sex toy into a symbol of women's liberation in

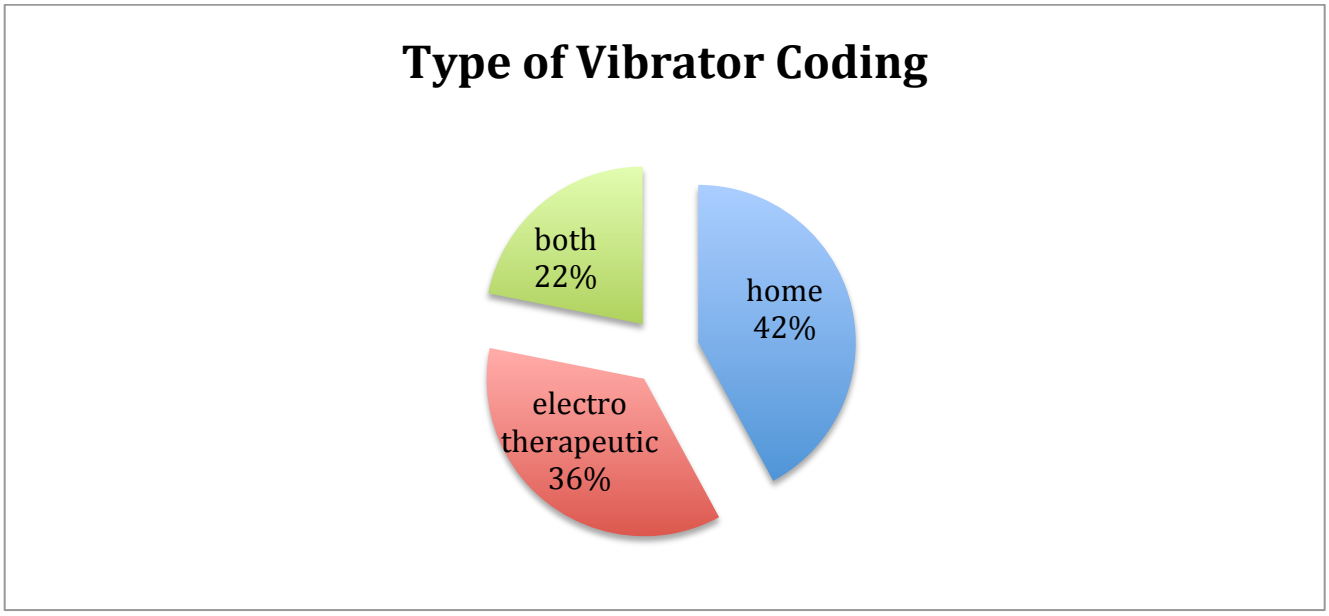
---

[94] A search of *The New York Times* found ads from the 1930s, a search of *The Pittsburgh Courier* showed ads from the 1940s, and a search of the trade literature collection at the Smithsonian's NMAH found vibrators in Sears catalogs in the 1950s. In the 1950s, *Amazing Stories* magazine and *The New York Times* also ran vibrator ads.

[95] For examples of these types of vibrator advertisements and catalogs, see The Kinsey Institute's collection of Sex Aids Dealers (U.S.) (20th c. 1960-1979). In particular, the Le Salon catalog, "Gifts for All Season" section, which features three different vibrators made of cheap plastic (circa 1970). The March 1972 Popular Products Brochure features an ad for a cheap plastic massager.

the 1970s they chose a dual-use vibrator similar to the ones discussed in this chapter. After nearly seven decades, the dominant meaning of the electric vibrator became sexual. However, the dual-use marketing strategy never disappeared, because societal restrictions continued. But once the dominant meaning shifted, vibrator ads virtually disappeared from national newspapers and magazines. Ironically, the sexual revolution forced electric vibrators to leave the mainstream media and become sequestered in the underground press, which is the subject of my next chapter.





Note: This data excludes ads that did not have framing.

All data was obtained through a search of *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times,* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* through the ProQuest Historical News Databases from 1900-1930.

Guide to Coding:

1. An ad was coded as **electrotherapeutic** if it included words like: *physician, doctor, medicine, treatment* and/or if it included claims to treat diseases, such as, *rheumatism, sciatica, deafness*.
2. An ad was coded as a **home appliance** if it lacked medical claims and included words like *beautifier, massage, wrinkles* and claims to make women beautiful and enhance cosmetic appearance.
3. An ad was coded as **both** if it contained both types of claims**.**
4. An ad was **not coded** and not included in the data if it did not have any clear coding. Example: A drugstore ad listing products for sale that says "Vibrator…$5.00"

Sexual Themes: An ad was listed as having sexual themes if it described the vibrator as being useful for massaging breasts or genitals, and/or if it include sexualized men or women in the ads. Nearly half the ads that contained illustrations had sexual themes.

Chicago (Daily) Tribune: 31 ads contained illustrations of people, and over half of these ads (16, 51.6%) contained arguably sexual content.

Los Angeles Times: 13 ads contained illustrations of people, and over half of these ads (7), contained arguably sexual content.

The New York Times: 18 ads contained illustrations of people and 39% of these (7) contained arguably sexual content.

Total ads featuring illustrations that contained sexual content: 30/62 = 48%

Figure 1: Advertising Card for Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound (1888). From Helen Cushman Trade Card Collection. Wilmington, DE, Hagley Museum and Library.

Figure 2: Lindstrom Smith Co., "Health and Beauty," 1916, Box 243, File Lindstrom Smith. Historical Health Fraud Collection, American Medical Association Archives.

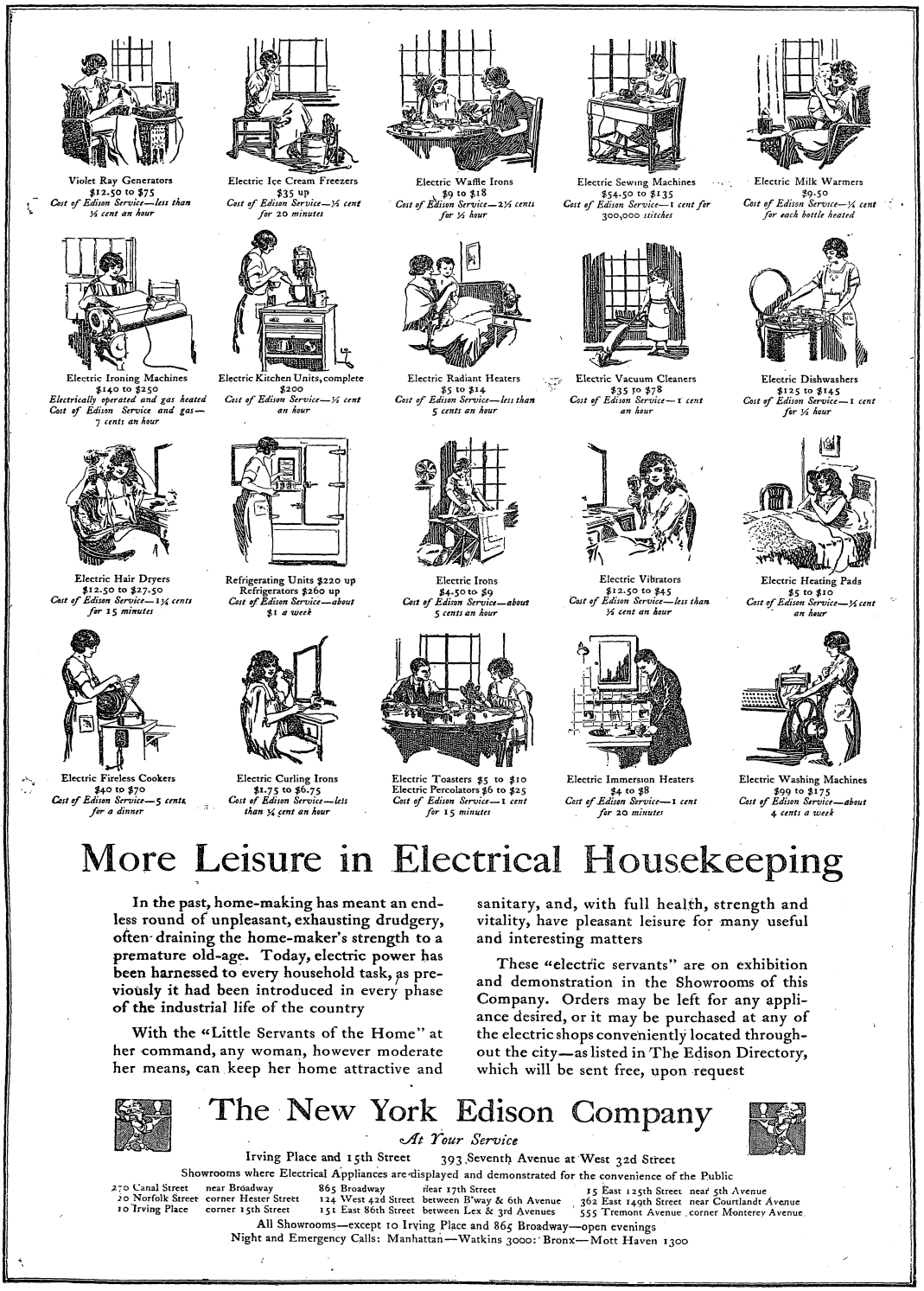


Figure 3: New York Edison Company ad showing the vibrator as a domestic appliance. Hamilton Beach Co., "More Leisure in Electrical Housekeeping," The New York Edison Company advertisement in *The New York Times*, 25 May 1925, 9.

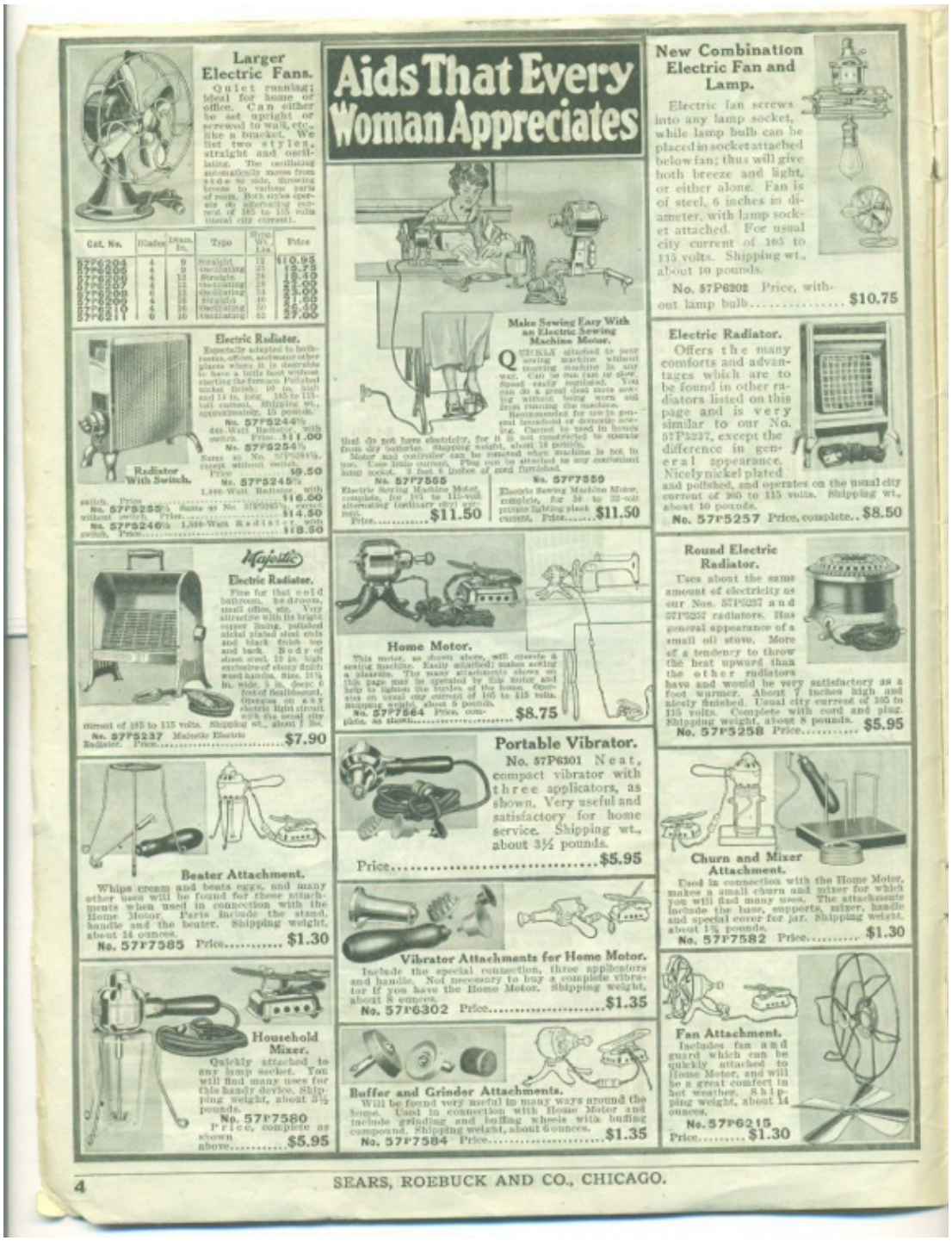


Figure 4: Sears Roebuck and Company, Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop "Aids that Every Woman Appreciates" Sears Roebuck and Company, Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop (1918), 4 in Bakken Library and Museum of Electricity in Life Trade Literature Collection.

Figure 5: Hygeia Vibrator ad from *Health* magazine 31 December 1903, 342 (top) and from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* 16 November 1902 (bottom).

Figure 6: White Cross Vibrator Ad *Health* 31 December 1908, 258.

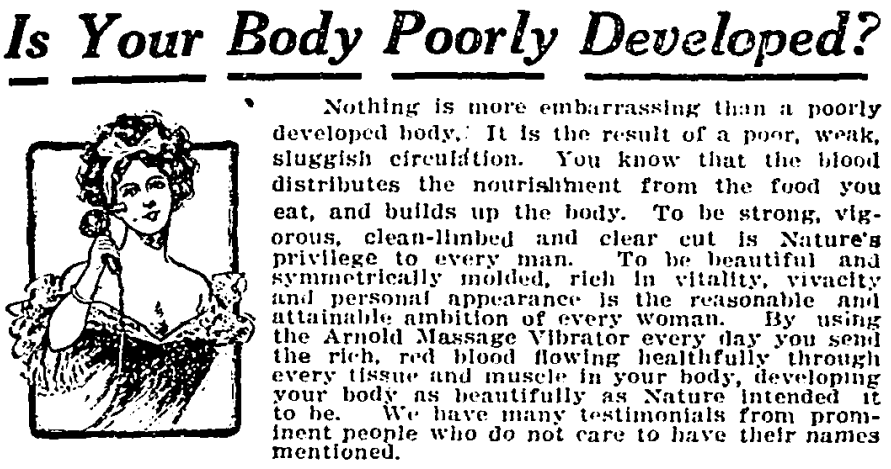


Figure 7: Detail from Arnold Vibrator Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune* 28 March 1909, B9.

SUN, MAY 4, 1913. 3

The "TRY-NEW-LIFE" Is Still Proving To Be the Popular Family Doctor

It Relieves All Pain Instantly and Permanently; It Is Wonderful How the Body Recovers Its Balance by Scientific Methods of Stimulating Blood Circulation.

Headache, Rheumatism, Nervousness, Indigestion and Constipation, and Many of the Ills Which are So Common, Readily give Away to "Try-New-Life."

Rheumatism, Most Painful of Diseases, Yields to "Try-New-Life"

Do you suffer with rheumatism? Then you are one of the thousands in this city who need "TRY-NEW-LIFE"—for it positively does relieve the pain and gives you a good start on the way to permanent cure.

Come in and try it—you won't believe half the truth until you do. No matter what kind of rheumatism you have, no matter how severe the pain, no matter how many thousands and dollars and remedies you have tried in vain—"TRY-NEW-LIFE" will work wonders for you.

Inflammatory Rheumatism

Inflammatory rheumatism is perhaps the most painful malady known to mankind. It is caused by particles of uric acid which are deposited by the blood in the tissues of nerve and muscle, and in the joints. In the former condition, the blood, becoming overcharged and congested, not only causes more suffering of the nerves and more pain.

Sometimes it pulls your head down, sometimes to one side and sometimes you go about bowing your one shoulder—and always suffering pain and inconvenience. "TRY-NEW-LIFE" will relieve you.

But "TRY-NEW-LIFE" will give instant relief from pain, and, unless the joint has been permanently made useless by many growth, will restore use of the joint.

Lobby short of miracles seems the effect of "TRY-NEW-LIFE" in the matter of its application. The pain disappears, the nerves are calmed, the blood vessels are stimulated to carry away the waste matter and relieve the congestion. In fact blood functions are taken care of, the uric acid deposits, and healthy conditions are set up. Perhaps will not take you like a load of "TRY-NEW-LIFE." Come in and get a trial free.

Lumbago

Lumbago, that back-breaking pain in the small of the back that makes you wish all hard over, with the aid of a few of bottle loads free in and for "TRY-NEW-LIFE"—kidneys is nothing but disease—all of the muscles of the back. Due pain is the same as the cause of all the kinds of drudgeries, and "TRY-NEW-LIFE" relieves it in an instant, at as it does all other kinds.

Stiff Neck

Stiff neck, or any neck, is usually sometimes to the muscles of the neck. Now be applied in previous pain.

Gout Is Very Close Akin to Rheumatism

Gout is a very close ally to rheumatism, but in this case the uric acid is deposited in the form of chalk, usually around the joints of fingers and toes. Great, hard lumps disfigure the hands, and pressure of them in normal and bend. Relief is afforded by "TRY-NEW-LIFE" in the same way as in rheumatism. Get the start with a bottle today and be free from pain. Dozens of men and women have used "TRY-NEW-LIFE" for two years, and would not consider she was opening and closing their hand with ease and with no pain. The chief basis of gout is uric acid, and "TRY-NEW-LIFE" will soon remove the last of her trouble.

Remember, good morning, relative, "TRY-NEW-LIFE" is recommended by "TRY-NEW-LIFE." Take it until it cures you. Don't come in and be ashamed of that cold and say for yourself. Hamilton Beach Sales Company, 307 Templeton Bldg., will give you free demonstration.

This remarkable little machine may be had for two weeks for a small rental and at the end of two weeks the rental will be applied on purchase price.

Free Beauty Treatment

Brings Sense of Comfort

Still Room for a Few Live Agents

Hamilton-Beach Sales Company

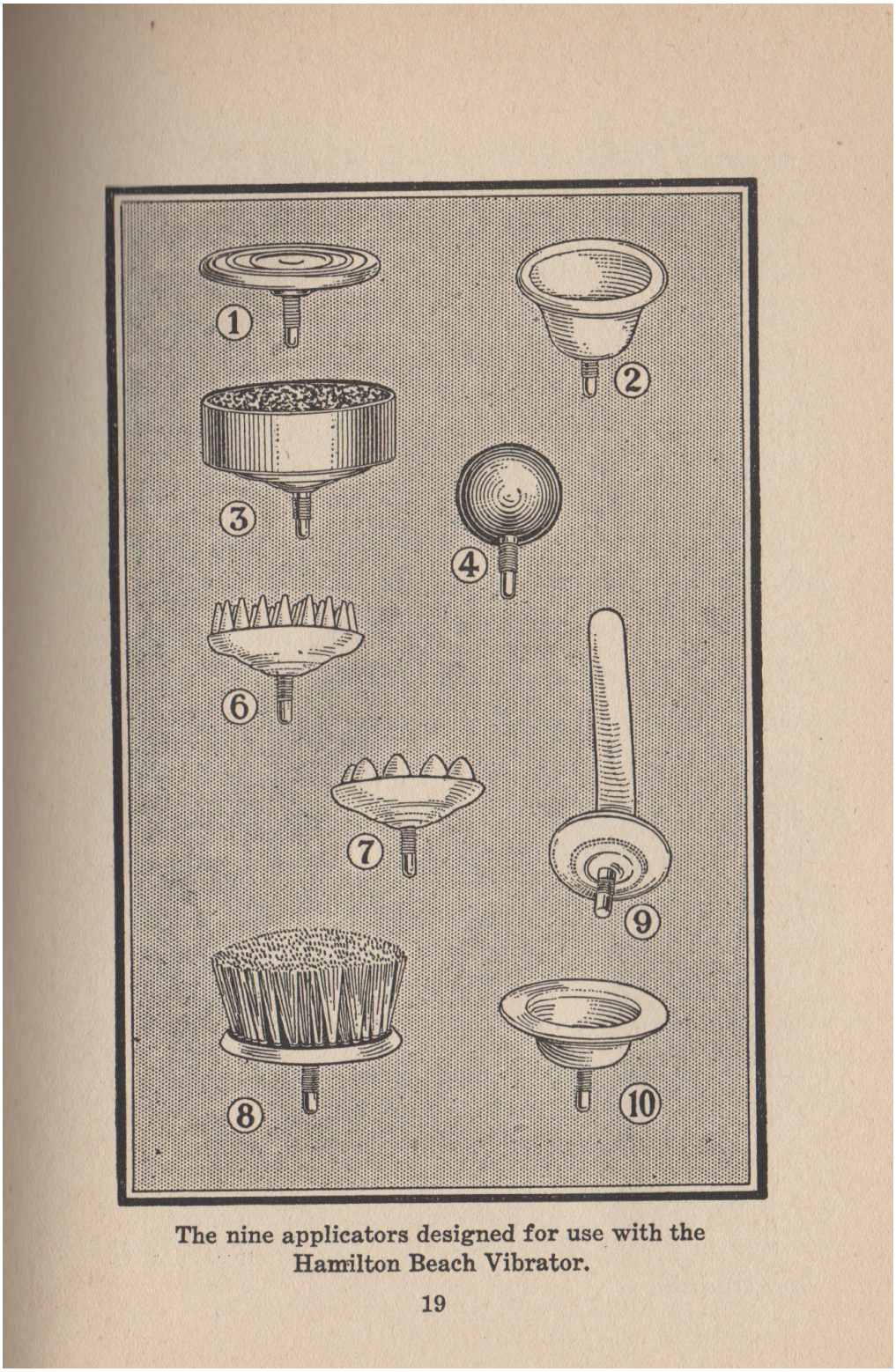
307 Templeton Bldg. Wasatch 2380 Salt Lake City, Utah

Figure 8: Hamilton Beach New Life Vibrator Ad; 4 May 1913 *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3.

Figure 9: Shelton Vibrator Outfit No. 7 ca. 1906-1917; Manufactured in Chicago, IL. Courtesy of Science Museum, London, England. A659643. Photo by Eric Schatzberg.

Figure 10: Lindstrom Smith Co., White Cross Vibrator Advertisement, *Popular Mechanics*, Advertising Section, 151.

Figure 11: Lindstrom Smith *Health and Beauty* pamphlet, advertisements for the White Cross Vibrator; Jan 12, 1911; American Medical Association Historical Health Fraud Collection; Box 243; File: Lindstrom Smith.



The nine applicators designed for use with the Hamilton Beach Vibrator.

19

Figure 12: *Health and How to Get It*. Edited by Charles Lee Bryson. Racine, WI: Hamilton Beach Mfg. Company, 1927, 19.

TUESDAY, NOV. 26, 1912. THE DES MOINES NEWS 3

Pain Conquered At Last–Come See for Yourself

PUBLIC IS INVITED TO A FREE DEMONSTRATION

Come In and Test the Wonderful Results of "Try-New-Life," the New Scientific Discovery

Nothing Like it Ever Known for the Relief of Pain, the Healing of Disease and the Building Up of Weak Bodies.

Are you in pain? Are you sick? Are you suffer from rheumatism, indigestion, headache, backache, nervousness, weak kidneys or bladder —any of the long list of ailments that torment humanity?

Then you will want to come to the great, free demonstration of "Try-New-Life," the latest and most wonderful scientific discovery for the relief of pain, the healing of sickness, and the building up of a strong body.

Come at once to 320 W. Eighth St., and be shown that pain can be relieved in a moment; that headache can be taken away instantly; that "Try-New-Life," the latest and most, is Nature ever shows.

If you are suffering from any cause whatsoever, instruct relief is what you want. That is what you get when "Try-New-Life" is applied to the seat of pain. You feel it at once. The healing, tingling warmth of the threshold the soothing of the pain is relieved, and the return of vigor and strength that instantly pervade the whole body.

When you have read this story let your first trip down town be to the store of Hamilton Beach Sales Company at 320 W. Eighth St., Phone Walnut 1656, and see for yourself. Take no man's word for it that "Try-New-Life" holds relief for you—some sad one, without a trial of cost.

If you have a headache you will be amazed and delighted at the ease with which "Try-New-Life" soothes it away. Headache is caused by congestion of the head, and the pressure of the blood vessels against the delicate nerves lying just underside the skull. Two pressure over pass upward from the nerve-ends to the top of the head, and from the temple up to the top of the head, and another pair on the back of the head.

"Try-New-Life" not only soothes and quiets the nerves and takes away the pain, but by aiding on the circulation removes the pressure on the nerves and so prevents the pain returning. No matter what kind of headache you have, come to us and see, free of cost, that it can be relieved.

Does indigestion make your days unhappy and your meal times especially painful? No matter what form it takes, whether burning and gnawing of the stomach, formation of gas, pressure, bloating, or whether the food merely lies in the stomach a dead weight, "Try-New-Life" will afford relief in a moment. It soothes the pain, removes the poisons from the stomach, tones the stomach, stimulates a healthy circulation, and assists in the mechanical movements of the stomach and bowels. You feel the effects the moment you eat.

Backache may suffer with backache. It is the base of thousands of women, everywhere. Often it is the first symptom of kidney and bladder trouble, which will not yield to medicine. No matter the cause, "Try-New-Life" gives relief. The aches and pains are taken away from the small of the back, the kidneys resume their proper sluggishness, and a feeling of warmth, vigor, strength comes over the whole body. Headache is often caused by backache, a sluggish kidney, or other disorder of the kidneys. No matter what the cause, relief is immediate. Come and see for yourself.

Nervousness and shortness of breath are usually caused by a weak stomach, and to cultivate the habit of taking the drugs to get sleep—it is dangerous.

Instant Relief! That's what a woman wants when she has rheumatism that tortures him night and day. And that is what "Try-New-Life" (no wonder it's so named) gives. It soothes the nerves—which gives the most thorough and yet the most gentle massage to muscles, nerves and blood vessels, sending a warm glow through all the aching parts, driving away the pain, as if by magic.

Instant relief is what a woman wants when she has that throbbing, tearing, crushing headache which seems about to burst her skull. Every woman knows the feeling, and how helpless she is in the grasp of a headache. Instant relief is what she gets when the soft, velvet rubber applicator of the "Try-New-Life" instrument is passed over the tender skin and the soothing nerves of temple and brow. The gentle touch of the instrument and the grateful touch of the ointment that comes with it, and the pain begins to leave, and after a few minutes there is only a sleepy, restful, and contented sense of great relief. That's what a man wants when he has had a hard day at work, and is tired, nervous and exhausted. He only wants to be able to sleep or even to lie still in bed. "Try-New-Life" relieves all that in a moment. Placed gently on the spine, it soothes and quiets the excited nerves, as even an opiate could not do. The quivering muscles, the nerves are no longer on edge, the pain is relieved, and he becomes restful and composed. All this is done in a perfectly natural and healthful way, aiding and encouraging the natural method of sleeping and not artificial one.

Is your hearing poor? Until you have tried it you cannot picture to yourself the aid and comfort that ation from the very first application. Deafness is often relieved by a single application to head, often requiring eight or ten applications before positive results can be seen. But it has sometimes happened that a very few applications have proved to be all that were almost useless for years. Unless the ear drum or the delicate mechanism of the inner ear has been destroyed by disease it is almost certain that "Try-New-Life" will give relief. It stops in a moment the ringing and roaring noises, and is administered to the ear in such a manner as to be entirely free from pain. If you are hard of hearing, come in and see for yourself what it will do.

If you are subject to sore, tired, aching feet, you cannot imagine the delightful relief that comes from the slightest use of "Try-New-Life." All the dull aching, all the burning and smarting, are taken away, and the feet at once feel fresh and rested.

No other method approaches "Try-New-Life" in the successful treatment of rheumatism. It goes to the spot left weak and wasted by such cases or disease. No matter what the cause—neuralgia, a broken bone, wasting sickness, lack of nutrition—"Try-New-Life" will help nature. The proper use of muscles will cause them to waste away. "Try-New-Life" hounds, massages, stimulates and builds up as no other agency can. It drives away the pains and penalties, which often leaves the life one almost helpless. "Try-New-Life" will help invigorate and strengthen the flabby muscles, urge the blood through the veins, send it bound to the parts, stimulate the nerves to order the re-building of the wasted tissues, and bring back health and strength as nothing else can do.

For the person who suffers from no special disease, yet who feels always tired, languid, listless, run-down and nervous, there is no better tonic than "Try-New-Life" as well. "Try-New-Life" is given a vim and vigor, a sense of strength and self reliance, and assurance, that can come from no medicine.

For the person who suffers from any cause at all you are not perfectly strong and healthy, take my store's word for it, and come to 320 West Eighth St. AND SEE "Try-New-Life" for yourself. Treatment is free, and you will be under no obligation, or phone Walnut 1656 for further information.

LIVE AGENTS WANTED

Real hustlers, men and women of push and character, who command respect, are wanted to sell the "Try-New-Life" vibrator in every section of Iowa.

Write or call the Hamilton-Beach Sales Co., 320 W. 8th St., Des Moines, Phone Walnut 1656.

300-PAGE BOOK FREE WITH EACH "TRY-NEW-LIFE" INSTRUMENT

With each "Try-New-Life" instrument goes, absolutely free, a beautiful bound book of 300 pages, with 40 illustrations. This book was written and published exclusively for "Try-New-Life," and sells in the stores at $3 a copy. But, to purchasers of "Try-New-Life" it is free.

The book gives a brief description of the human body and its workings, and lists and describes some 75 of the common human ailments, giving full directions for their treatment with "Try-New-Life."

Ask to see the book when you come in for a free treatment.

INDIGESTION, HEADACHE, BACKACHE OR ANY PAIN YIELDS TO "TRY-NEW-LIFE"

Rheumatism in All Its Forms—Lumbago, Sciatica Gout, Stiff Joints, Sore Muscles—Are Given Ease in a Moment

"Try-New-Life Offices Open Day and Evening

Come at Once and See What It will Do For You. The Treatment is Free and You Cannot Believe All the Truth Until You Try It.

Rheumatism yields instantly to "Try-New-Life" in another way, and a very good one, for thousands of people, for rheumatism has victims by the thousand in every city of the country. If you have rheumatism in any form, come to 320 West Eighth St., and see for yourself. Without a cost or cost to you, that rheumatism can be relieved in a few minutes. That is a broad statement—almost too broad to be believed—but it is true. Come and see. No matter what kind of rheumatism you have—come and see. No matter how long you have suffered, or how much treatment you have used, how many pat medicines you have carried as charms—come and see. You will be surprised, and glad, and you will be surprised, and glad, and you will you have had experience.

You may have rheumatism of the muscles which makes them painful and sore and weak, even though they are not swollen and inflamed to any extent. Or you may have inflammatory rheumatism, with the joints swollen and inflamed, and the pain excruciating. "Try-New-Life" will relax the muscles, soothe the irritating nerves, and the pain will go. Relief will be instant and lasting. Rheumatism is caused by poisonous matter in the blood, which is thrown against the joints through the congested part, and in a measure you will have more relief than you have known in weeks.

Sciatica is a form of acute pain, where the sufferer is stricken with agony. Sciatica cannot agree exactly what—has been deposited in the muscles and has caused congestion, swelling, fever and pain. And "Try-New-Life" will relieve it in a few minutes. Not necessary to do any other kind. Delicacy is required at first in treating the swollen and tender parts, but in a few moments the pain will be gone away, and the sufferer gets relief.

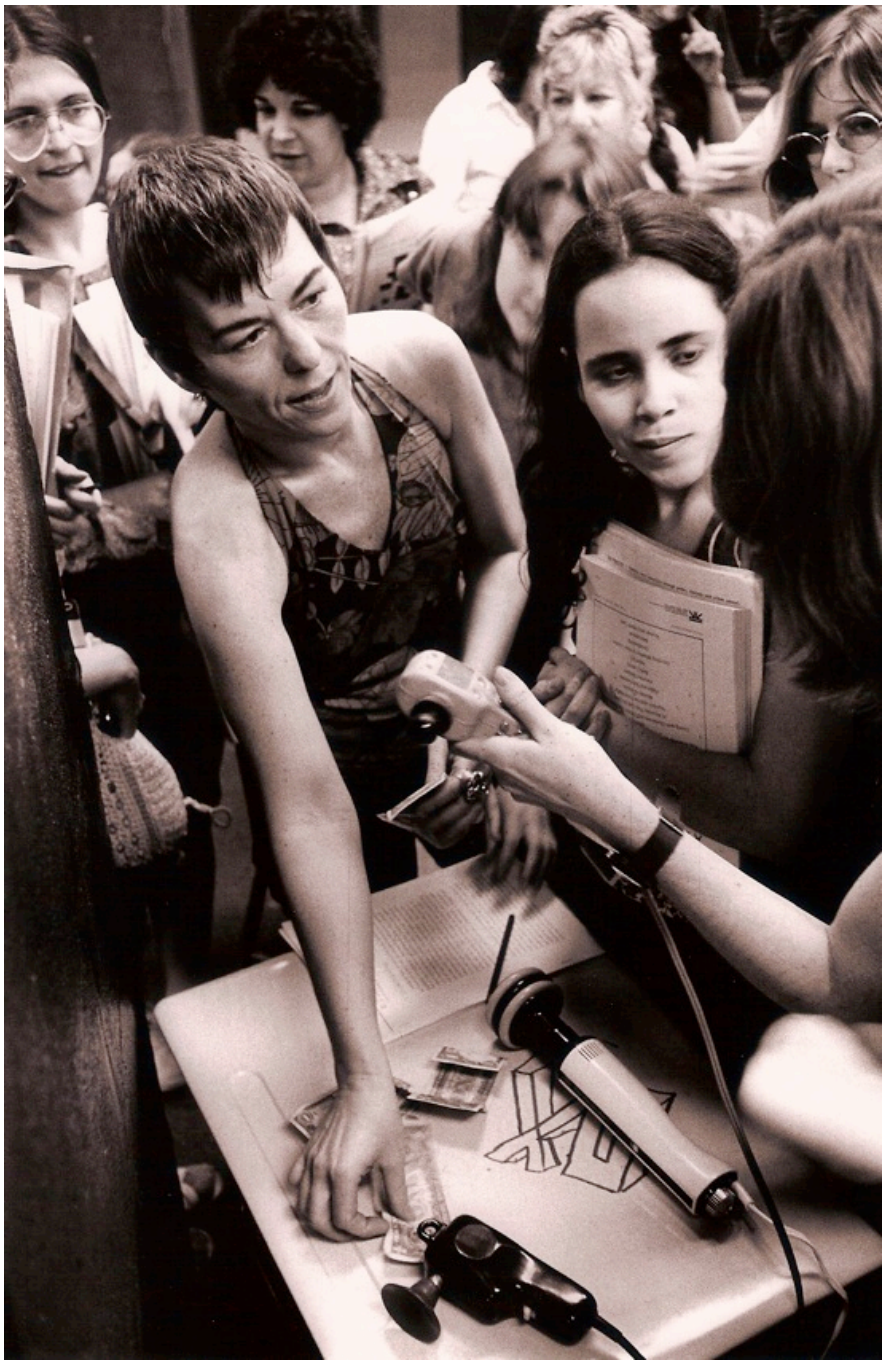
Lumbago is that troublesome form of rheumatism that attacks the muscles of the back, and renders you almost helpless with pain. It comes, or seems, to you in bed for weeks. Day after day there is the same backaching, aching, pain, pain in the small of the back, the muscles seem to be drawn across the spine and stand, or walk, or stoop, or sit, or lie down, and you are in misery. Come and take it away. Don't wait another day. Come to the headquarters at 320 West Eighth St., and see for yourself, or phone Walnut 1656 for further information.

Stiff joints are something that "Try-New-Life" will relieve in a few minutes. Just a few drops of this wonderful liquid, rubbed into the joints, and the joints will become limber and supple. Stiff joints are usually caused by rheumatism, and "Try-New-Life" will relieve the rheumatism, and the joints will become limber and supple. Stiff joints are usually caused by rheumatism, and "Try-New-Life" will relieve the rheumatism, and the joints will become limber and supple.

Sore muscles—"Try-New-Life" will relieve them in a few minutes. Just a few drops of this wonderful liquid, rubbed into the muscles, and the pain will be gone. Sore muscles are usually caused by rheumatism, and "Try-New-Life" will relieve the rheumatism, and the muscles will become limber and supple. Sore muscles are usually caused by rheumatism, and "Try-New-Life" will relieve the rheumatism, and the muscles will become limber and supple.

Come in and see for yourself. Come in and see for yourself. Come in and see for yourself.

Chapter 6: Vibrators and the Sexual Revolution



In the late 1960s, a woman who wanted a sex toy had to navigate the seedy underbelly of America. Sex toys, if openly marketed, were marginally legal devices. If a woman wanted to buy a sex toy she had to go to an adult bookstore, a morass of unchecked male id. She would have to

drive to a dangerous area, as zoning laws relegated adult bookstores to the outskirts of town, far away from schools, churches, or playgrounds. After apprehensively entering the store, she would have to make her way past hundreds of porn magazines displaying gynecological close-ups of vuvlas, and peepshow booths, off in their own section, full of sticky seats and masturbating men. If a woman was brave enough to push past the patrons with visible erections who were flipping through porn magazines, she would find, in a small back section of the store, hidden among an array of dildos, artificial vaginas, whips, and female blow-up dolls, a vibrator or two.[1] Plastic, battery-operated phallic vibrators of about 6 inches in length hung on the racks. These were low-quality devices unsuitable for clitoral stimulation. So it was no wonder only 1-3% of adult bookstore patrons were women. Instead, the typical adult bookstore shopper was "white, middle-aged, middle class, married male…shopping alone."[2] Even the adult-business guides suggested ignoring the women's market. "Make your main appeal to men," said one guide. "Women still don't seem to excite sexually as the result of viewing nudity and visually explicit sexual activity as much as men do. Starting an adult mail order company by trying to break new ground would be inadvisable."[3]

By the mid-1970s, however, a few radical feminists began to challenge this system of sex-toy distribution and offer an alternative model informed by second-wave feminism. In this chapter, I begin by detailing the sex-toy industry in the early 1970s (pre-feminist intervention), then I examine the marketing of the vibrator from the 1940s to the 1960s. I follow with a section

---

[1] Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*.(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 101.
[2] Ibid, 129; 101.
[3] Although the author is suggesting to avoid the women's market when selling pornography, he later clarifies that both sex toys and pornography are worth selling in an adult-mail business, as long as you're selling those devices to men. "Understanding the Market," *The Adult Business Mail Marketing Guide* (Washington, D.C.: RPE Publications, 1979), 5. Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

describing changes in obscenity laws from the 1950s to 1970s. Finally, I show how a pioneering woman attempted to transform the cultural status of the vibrator, changing it from a thinly veiled therapeutic device to an orgasm machine that would hasten women's liberation.

In 1970 the American landscape was dotted with adult bookstores. Out of the 850 adult bookstores, 25% carried sex toys. For people who were not brave enough to enter an adult bookstore, sex devices were also available via mail order. Most of what was available were artificial penises and vaginas, which were sold for $10 to $20 dollars, a nearly 1,000% mark-up. Hundreds of mail-order companies selling erotica existed, though the exact number of them is unknown, as is the number that sold sex toys. Companies spent over 2 million on mailing their catalogs, enough to send 36 million pieces of mail. Yet federal statutes prohibited mailing "obscene material" And 48 states had their own obscenity statutes. But no official definition of "obscene materials" existed.[4]

However, even as laws banned obscenity, President Lyndon B. Johnson's appointed Commission on Obscenity and Pornography had just recommended in 1970 that "federal, state, and local legislation prohibiting the sale, exhibition, or distribution of sexual materials to consenting adults should be repealed."[5] They had found no negative effects from people who had been exposed to pornography. They were not more likely to commit crimes. And the majority of the Americans they had polled agreed that there should not be any restrictions on sales of sexual material to adults.[6]

---

[4] The Commission defined sex toys as non-book or magazine sex-related products. See, *Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, 102. *Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, 37, 38,51,53, 105, 109 &111.
[5] Ibid, 51.
[6] Ibid, 53.

The sex toy industry was in limbo. Because sex toys were distributed via adult bookstores that primarily sold pornography, most adult bookstore patrons were male. Women did not feel comfortable going into them to buy sex toys. Women lost access to sex toys. They could have ordered vibrators from these catalogs or walked into an adult store to buy them, but both the stores and the catalogs were mostly for men only. This represented a huge shift from the early 1900s, when vibrators were distributed in female-friendly emporiums like department stores and drugstores. Vibrators were still sold in some department stores in the 1970s, but the existence of the openly sexualized vibrator had rendered the camouflage of the multi-use vibrator moot.

No longer were most vibrators thinly concealed as therapeutic devices. They were unabashedly sexual devices. While in some ways this represented a positive development in the industry, since companies were being honest about the sexual uses of their vibrators, in other ways the unveiling of the vibrator led to a decline in quality and a disappearance of vibrator ads from the mainstream media.

The sexual revolution should have been a boon to vibrator purveyors. In an era awash in discussions of orgasms, birth control, and gay rights, the sex toy should have become more widely accepted than ever before. And, in some ways it was. Feminists co-opted sex toys as a symbol of empowerment. But a strange thing happened when the vibrator and its camouflaged cousins became rebranded as sexual pleasure devices, losing their medical and massager disguises. Vibrators paid a big price for going from dual-use to single-use devices. In some ways, selling a vibrator as a quack medical device was more liberating than selling it as a vessel for sexual pleasure. When a vibrator is seen as simply a substitute for human genitals, it becomes threatening, especially when it is caught against the background of a cultural shift.

Although Rachel Maines argued that the vibrator lost its social camouflage in the 1920s because it began appearing in pornographic films, I argue that the shift happened forty years later. Maines said that vibrator ads disappeared from mainstream media in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, but my research shows that there was never a break in vibrator ads. The frequency of these ads decreased after the late 1920s, probably as a result of the Great Depression and the fact that the vibrator was no longer a new technology.[7]

But an orgasm machine still could not be advertised in *The New York Times* in the 1970s unless it was disguised as a back massager. Because although socially America was progressing, legally it remained mired in the 19th century. The Comstock Act remained on the books in a slightly altered form, and courts prosecuted companies for advertising books about sex toys.[8] So the sexual revolution essentially forced sex-toy companies underground, and their advertisements became relegated to niche magazines with a sexually liberated readership, which meant that feminist magazines carried the bulk of these sexually explicit advertisements.

The Proto-Sexual Revolution (1940s-early 1960s)

There is no exact moment in American history that heralded the start of the sexual revolution. A number of keystone events make up the sexual revolution: the birth-control pill being approved for contraceptive use in 1960; the 1969 riots at the New York City gay bar the Stonewall Inn, where gay and lesbian patrons stood up to their police harassers; the premier of pornographic movie *Deep Throat* in 1972, which heralded a wave of porno chic. But most historians trace its origins earlier, back to the 1940s and 1950s, when Alfred Kinsey published

---

[7] Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 20, 108-110.
[8] See, Martha Bailey, "'Mommas Got the Pill': How Anthony Comstock and *Griswold v. Connecticut* Shaped U.S. Childbearing," *American Economic Review* 100, no. 1 (2010): 98-129; Joshua Gamson, "Rubber Wars: Struggles Over the Condom in the United States," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, No. 2 (Oct. 1990), 262-282.

The Sexual Behavior of the Human Male and *The Sexual Behavior of the Human Female*. I take this earlier date as my starting point.[9]

Although the sex-toy industry did not fundamentally change until the early 1970s, the earlier stirrings of the sexual revolution played a key role in the changing of sexual mores that allowed for the public discussions of sex. By assuming the mantle of apolitical, unbiased scientist, Kinsey managed to make sex a topic of national discussion, and his research led to his controversial claim that a wide variety of sexual practices that had been previously considered deviant, such as homosexuality and masturbation, were, statistically-speaking, normal. One of his most oft-quoted statistics from 1948's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was that 37% of men in his sample reported a homosexual experience and 90% of his male sample reported ever having masturbated over their lifetimes.[10]

But in some ways *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, published five years later, was even more controversial. Kinsey exploded Freud's assertion that women had two types of orgasms: vaginal and clitoral. Freud had argued that the clitoral orgasm was immature because it originated in childhood masturbation, and that once a girl becomes a woman, she is supposed to grow out of the clitoral stage and experience a deeper sexual pleasure that originates in the vagina. Freud thought the vaginal orgasm was superior because it was caused by intercourse. But

---

[9] David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2000), 15-17; Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 2-3, 46-48; John Heindry, *What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 17-39. Heindry believes the sexual revolution is "a permanent continuum of revolutionary events that has scarcely begun." (12).

[10] James Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 528. Kinsey measured sexual behavior by counting the number of orgasms, and listing the number of sexual outlets to orgasm a person had, categorizing them according to homosexual outlets, heterosexual intercourse, masturbation, nocturnal emissions, animal contacts, and petting. Another frequently cited claim was that about one-third had had extramarital intercourse, and eighty-five percent had had premarital intercourse.

Kinsey asserted that all orgasms were directly or indirectly clitoral. Additionally, he found that 62% of his female sample had masturbated, half had had premarital intercourse and a quarter had extramarital intercourse.[11] Kinsey's work was important not because it necassirly changed American sexual behavior, but as journalist Max Lerner, wrote in 1957, because it changed "American attitudes" towards sex and broke taboos. Learner argues that "Kinsey's impact was that of a kind of Guilt Killer."[12]

Nonetheless, Kinsey's work did not change the marketing of vibrators. Knowledge about female masturbation should have meant that the vibrator could no longer masquerade as a health device in the 1940s and 1950s. But the vibrator innocently buzzed on. The vibrator industry boomed during this era as vibrator technology gradually lost some of its sexuality. Vaginal and rectal attachments disappeared, and vibrator brochures no longer suggested vibrating the genitals. Rechristened as back and scalp massagers, vibrators came to men's attention when they received scalp and neck massages from their barbers with vibrators made by shaver companies like Wahl and Andis. These eccentric motor-powered vibrators were worn on the back of the hand and attached with two sets of straps: one attached to the second knuckle on the ring and middle fingers, and one to the base of the hand. When the motor was turned on, the fingers would vibrate, allowing the wearer of the vibrator to turn his fingers into vibrators. Unlike the vibrators before them, many of these could be attached to a speed regulator that would vary the motor's speed.[13]

---

[11] Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey,* 689.
[12] Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 687.
[13] Oster promotional pamphlet, "Massage: An Aid to Better Health with the Oster Suspended Motor massage Instrument,"1948; Andis "The Home of Precision-Built Tools: A Conducted Tour Through the Andis Clipper Company at Racine, Wis.," 1952. Racine Heritage Museum, Racine, Wisconsin.

However, sexual innuendos were still apparent in advertisements for these scalp massagers. A headline in a 1948 ad for the Vivatone Electric Vibrator declares "Hey Men! Here's a Way to Really Stimulate Your Scalp and Hair" next to a drawing of a man placing the vibrator on his head, and the ad gets progressively more sexual as it goes on. A paragraph later, the ad suggests using the vibrator "from head to foot!" to "see how good it feels," the "tingling sensation as it moves over those muscles and fatty areas." "Absolutely safe for any part of the body." It also featured a muscled man in underwear, clutching a vibrator with a drawing of a woman on the left saying, "That's the kind of man I like!"[14] (Figure 1)

As they did in the early 1900s, companies took out ads promoting vibrators as essential household devices, fitting the vibrator into the stereotypical gender roles of the era. Vibrators were considered such innocuous devices that in 1953 Good Housekeeping bestowed their seal of approval upon some models.[15] (Figure 2) Sears, one of the largest and most reputable mail-order houses, manufactured a Kenmore vibrator in 1956, which they advertised in their catalogs as producing "that great-to-be-alive feeling."[16] (Figure 3)

As the vibrator continued to be camouflaged, other stirrings of the sexual revolution could be seen in popular culture. In 1953, Hugh Hefner's first edition of *Playboy* hit the newsstands with Marilyn Monroe on the cover, joining multiple men's magazines that began to be circulated widely, including *Esquire, Modern Man,* and *Look*. How the vibrator could remain innocent is related to the fact that the commercial sexual revolution hit men first. Aside from

---

[14] Vivatone vibrator ad, *Amazing Stories,* June 1948, 175.
[15] Oster Vibrator, Tyco Shop By Mail Catalog (1953), Dobbs Ferry, New York, 50. Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Trade Literature Collection, Washington D.C.
[16] Kenmore Vibrator, Sears Christmas Book (1956), 372. Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Trade Literature Collection, Washington D.C.

Kinsey's study, women's sexuality was not openly discussed in the 1950s. American culture continued to be a pronatalist culture with traditional gender roles.[17]

In fact, it was not just cultural mores that pushed the vibrator out of the closet and caused it to be openly marketed as a sex toy, but it was also legal restrictions. In the 1950s, the Food and Drug Administration began cracking down on quack pseudo-sexual devices. One of their biggest targets was Austrian Psychologist Wilhelm Reich who moved to the U.S. from Norway in part out of fear of Hitler, and settled in Maine in 1939, and "began to popularize his orgone box, a telephone booth-size wooden box lined with zinc." Reich claimed that sitting in this box could cure impotence, among other things. In 1954, the FDA filed an injunction to prevent him from selling orgone boxes, which he soon violated.[18] This began the FDA's campaign against quack medical devices, including vibrators.

By 1958, the FDA targeted the vibrator industry as a whole and seized 10 companies' devices, claiming that they were falsely labeled. They declared that "It is illegal to promote vibrator devices as weight reducers and cure-alls for disease." Most companies simply removed the false claims and continued selling vibrators, with more muted assertions. But the days of selling the vibrator as a panacea were over. The FDA did not think that companies should stop manufacturing vibrators altogether, but they issued a statement that said that "the benefits of vibration are limited to temporary relief of minor physical conditions. They may be soothing and relaxing to the user and help to relieve minor aches and pains due to fatigue or overexertion."[19]

---

[17] Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 4-36.
[18] "Facts on Quacks: What You Should Know About Health Quackery" (c.1960), 21. Historical Pamphlet File, Ebling Health Sciences Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
[19] "Investigate- Before You Invest!!!!" *Roanoke Better Business Bureau Newsletter,* January 15, 1959. 3. From American Medical Association, Chicago, IL. Box 495, Folder 11 "Mechanical Devices Special Data 1958-1962."

The FDA's vibrator ruling did not completely stop the false claims, of course. In 1963, the FDA declared that America was in the midst of a vibrator "craze" with "vibrator devices marketed in great variety but all alike mechanically—an electric motor with an off-center drive shaft."[20]

Although it is impossible to know how the crackdown affected the vibrator industry as a whole, the legislation, in combination with public discussions of sex, and a change in vibrator design, probably led to the sexualization of the vibrator. Because if you cannot sell a vibrator as a cure-all, you have to find another reason for people to buy it, and sex is always a good reason.

Obscenity Laws

It helped that obscenity laws became more lax at this time. In the 1957 *U.S. v. Roth* case the Supreme Court loosened the definition of obscenity for the first time in nearly a decade. Before 1957, the U.S. continued to rely primarily on the antiquated 1868 definition set down in Britain's *Regina v. Hicklin* that defined a work of art or sexual device as obscene based on how the most salacious excerpts of the material would affect the most susceptible members of society—children, the mentally ill, etc. [21] With *Roth,* the litmus test shifted to "whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole applies to prurient interest."[22] This shift resulted in more material being legalized, and fewer publications and devices being declared obscene. In addition to this test, the material under investigation also had to be "utterly without redeeming social significance." *Roth* ensured, for example, that sexual passages of books would not be taken out

[20] "Fake Medical Devices: An FDA Report" (Washington D.C.: October 1963), 9. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.
[21] Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press), 40-42.
[22] As quoted in Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 276.

of context leading to the banning of works of literature. However, *Roth* established that obscenity was not protected speech.

In 1966 another case reshaped the obscenity laws again. The book that caused such uproar was a 200-year-old novel written by an Englishman while he was in debtors' prison. *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* had been banned off and on since its publication in 1749, and had the dubious distinction of being the first erotic book banned in America in 1821. But in 1966 the Court declared that *Fanny Hill* was not obscene, and the book was not banned, but the obscenity test was changed again and obscenity was redefined as explicitly sexual and offensive. Now material was obscene if:

> (a) the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to a prurient interest in sex; (b) the material is patently offensive because it affronts contemporary community standards relating to the description or representation of sexual matters; and c) the material is utterly without redeeming social value.[23]

In the 1960s, the vibrator entered a period of limbo. No longer could false claims legally be attached to it, yet it still was not completely out as a sex toy. Meanwhile, other cultural changes occurred, as The Pill was first openly sold as a contraceptive in 1960. Another loosening of sex-related laws occurred in 1965, when the Court said that married people had a right to birth control.[24] But it was not until 1972 when unmarried people were granted that same right.[25] And it was not until 1977 that birth control could legally be advertised.[26]

Women began to question their roles as second-wave feminism washed in with the publication of two important books: Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962, which advocated for non-marital sex, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 which

---

[23] As quoted in Donald Downs, *The New Politics of Pornography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15-16.
[24] *Griswold v. Connecticut,* 381 U.S. 479 (1965)
[25] *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972)
[26] *Carey v. Population Services International,* 431 U.S. 678 (1977)

promoted a change in gender roles. Brown argued that women should get their fulfillment through sex, while Friedan argued that women should become fulfilled through their careers. Friedan interviewed middle-class housewives and discovered that they were unhappy with their traditional roles as wives and mothers, but society told them that they should be satisfied with the domestic role. Many women were left wondering why they felt a sense of existential angst. According to Ruth Rosen, Friedan "concentrated on the power of the feminine mystique, creating a concept through which she then accused the entire society and culture—the media, science, psychiatry, education, and social sciences—of a mass conspiracy to limit the lives of women. [27] However, Friedan was no libertine. She thought that the feminist turn to focus on women's sexuality was a mistake, as it distracted from more important issues like women's acceptance in professional positions in the workplace.[28] But vibrator advertisements continued to promote the ethos of the happy housewife, as a 1965 Macy's catalog shows.The vibrator was advertised as it was in the early 1900s; it was shown in a tableau with other household appliances, like can openers, toasters, irons, and blenders. The women's role was in the home, the ad implied, and these were the tools that she could use to improve it. [29]

Although sex was slowly becoming a topic of open, public discussion and *Roth* had loosened the obscenity laws, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service continued to arrest people for mailing obscenity. In fact, arrests increased in the early 1960s, doubling from 1960 to 1963. One of the biggest targets was Ralph Ginzburg, publisher of the erotic magazine *Eros* who later became the subject of his own obscenity trial in 1966. During the Supreme Court case *Ginzburg*

---

[27] Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 6, 4-8.
[28] Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 88.
[29] Macy's Catalog. 1965, 9. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington D.C.

v. United States he was convicted of "pandering" because he marketed *Eros* in a sexual way, sending his magazine from cities with sexual names, such as Intercourse, Pennsylvania. [30] "Pandering" became a new punishable offense that advertisers could get in trouble for. And just like obscenity, pandering lacked a clear definition.

During the late 1960s, President Johnson created the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Although the focus was mostly on pornography, they also studied adult bookstores, which sold sex toys as well as pornography.[31] In a study of Denver-based sex-oriented bookstores conducted by University of Colorado Professor Morris E. Massey, under the auspices of the Commission, Massey found that only 2.6% of the customers in adult bookstores were women, and only 24% of these women actually bought anything.[32]

In 1973 obscenity became redefined once again; this time it was the conservatives who were pleased, because the obscene was no longer just expression "without redeeming social significance, but any work that violated community standards, depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state (or federal) law," and "taken as whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.[33] This meant that a sex toy ad prosecuted as obscene in Texas might be considered legal in California. Fear of prosecution was magnified by *Miller* because a national company could be prosecuted based on the community standards of a conservative locale. Producers of obscenity could be prosecuted in multiple locales, greatly increasing the legal fees. This change presumably caused even fewer

---

[30] Ginzburg received over 35,000 complaints. See, *Special Report: U.S. Mail*, Fiscal Year 1963. Post Office Department, 24. Ralph Ginzburg Papers, Unprocessed Collection, 1961-1988, Eros Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
[31] These studies were limited, but they are some of the only market research available.
[32] Morris E. Massey, "A Marketing Analysis of Sex-Oriented Materials in a Single City," October 26, 1970, 18. Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. Bloomington, Indiana.
[33] *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (Calif. 1973).

legitimate producers to go into the sex-toy business, as the legal costs were just too high. Because most sex-toy companies had to distribute their wares via nationally distributed erotic catalogs they were also at great risk.

Although Kinsey had publicly asserted that the vaginal orgasm was a myth, it was not until William Masters and Virginia Johnson came along that the idea was truly challenged. Unlike Kinsey, Masters and Johnson used empirical data to demonstrate that all female orgasms originated in the clitoris. They proved this using "artificial coital equipment," (AKA, "Ulysses," named after the Kirk Douglas film), a nine-inch long motorized dildo packed with a camera and a powerful light. Using graduate students, prostitutes, and numerous other paid subjects, Masters and Johnson used Ulysses to record women's sexual responses during masturbation. What they found shocked the sexual status quo to its core: Women could have multiple orgasms during masturbation, and these masturbation-induced orgasms were more intense than those women had during intercourse.[34] Much to the satisfaction of feminists, Masters and Johnson had scientifically proven that men were unnecessary for sexual pleasure. As Thomas Maier quotes Masters saying, "Males hate this machine because invariably the females speed up the machine at a rate that no male can equal."[35] Masters and Johnson published the results of their research in 1966's *Human Sexual Response*. Intended primarily as a medical text for doctors, it went on to become a best seller with the general public.

Betty Dodson Uses a Vibrator

Masters and Johnson's studies were highly publicized in the mainstream media, which meant that female masturbation with sex toys was discussed widely in American culture for the

---

[34] Thomas Maier, *Masters of Sex: The Life and Times of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the Couple Who Taught America How to Love* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 98-101, 162, 242.
[35] Ibid., 101.

first time. The time was ripe for a public change in the status of the vibrator. Enter a 39-year-old artist named Betty Dodson, who was beginning to embrace her own lifelong masturbation habit, turning it into art. Betty Dodson was an unlikely champion of masturbation. Coming of age in Wichita, Kansas, in the 1940s, she struggled with her own burgeoning sexuality, as the society surrounding her condemned the habit that brought her such pleasure. But it was not just the Bible-thumping churchgoers who railed against masturbation, it was also her secular, liberal friends. So she scrounged the libraries for sex manuals to assure her that her habit was normal, but information on masturbation was difficult to come by, and she had to resort to "dreary marriage manuals and random bits of male-oriented Victorian psychiatry" that asserted masturbation was a dreadful habit[36] (Figure 4) Society told her that the only proper way to have an orgasm was through intercourse with your husband. But when she got married at age 29, she discovered, like most women, that she could not have orgasms during vaginal sex. She assumed that something was wrong with her. So she continued masturbating, simply hiding it from her husband. Seven years later, Dodson's husband left her and ran off with his secretary. [37]

That left Dodson divorced and determined to be sexually free in 1966, the same year *Human Sexual Response* was published. She gained a steady lover immediately, Grant Taylor, a former English-professor. And he introduced her to clitoral stimulation during intercourse, a key turning point in the development of her sexual philosophy. "After years of having orgasms by stimulating my clitoris during masturbation, why had I never thought of including my clitoris when having sex with a lover?" she asked herself.[38]

---

[36] Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, (New York: Betty Dodson, 1974), 1.
[37] Betty Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars* (New York: Betty Dodson, 2010), 28-38.
[38] Ibid*,* 40.

But her sexual anxieties did not just evaporate. She still had her deep, dark secret that she had never admitted to anybody else: She liked to masturbate. A lot. She had been doing it since childhood, and she had been doing it so much that she had deformed her own genitals, or so she thought. This anxiety surrounding her "misshapen" genitals did not dissipate until one day her lover was performing oral sex on her and he said, "You have a beautiful cunt." He wanted to examine her genitals closer. She resisted, insisting that her inner labia were deformed and elongated and "hung down like a chicken" because of her childhood masturbation. He protested, saying that many women had genital styles like hers. He went to his closet and got out a stack of pornography magazines and showed her "split-beaver" images of women spread-legged and displaying their vulvas for the camera.[39] Initially she was taken aback to be looking at pornography, having the ingrained feminist response that porn was demeaning to women. But this attitude did not last long. "By the time we'd gone through several magazines with him pointing out models that had genitals like mine, I realized I was 'normal,' and maybe even beautiful like he said." [40] To learn that her labia were not only normal, but also considered sexy enough to be featured in porn magazines was a revelation for Dodson. She felt empowered. Unlike other women's activists who saw pornography as destructive to women's self image, Dodson saw it as liberating.[41]

Soon after learning that her genitals were "normal," she admitted to her lover that her masturbation habit had not stopped during childhood. She had masturbated all throughout adulthood, including during her marriage. Instead of being shocked, her lover said that he had

---

[39] Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, (New York: Betty Dodson, 1974), 24.
[40] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars*, 42.
[41] The formal anti-pornography movement began in 1976 but discussions about the destructive nature of porn began in the late 1960s. For more on the feminist anti-porn movement see Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

done the same. They had hidden their masturbation habits from their spouses, so they decided that they would no longer hide their masturbation from each other.

They chose to masturbate in front of each other, but she wanted to masturbate by herself in front of a mirror before she did it in front of him to get a sense of what she looked like. When she masturbated while gazing into a mirror she realized, "I didn't look funny or awful—I simply looked sexual and intense."[42] Dodson says that watching herself masturbate was the "beginning of my freedom from the romanticized image of sex—a Sexual Independence Day. I celebrated by showing my lover I could have a first rate orgasm by myself."[43] Even though she felt empowered, she still felt a deep anxiety. For a woman, masturbating in front of a lover is fraught with a kind of anxiety that no man would feel in engaging in the same act. Not only are women taught that masturbation is wrong, but they are also taught that a man should be bringing them sexual pleasure. So even though Dodson saw her masturbation as a celebration of her sexual independence, she still feared that her lover would leave her if he realized that she "wasn't dependent on him for orgasm."[44] Dodson's lover did not leave her. And their sex got better. Much better. Something about sharing this sexual act that they had both been socialized to think of as shameful had deepened their bond.

Yet Dodson still had not discovered vibrators, until one day, when Taylor went to the a barber for a haircut and the barber strapped an Oster vibrator to his hand and proceeded to massage the back of his neck. (Figure 2) Taylor thought it would be the perfect sex toy, so he purchased one from a barbershop supply store the same day. He brought the vibrator home to use during sex play. Dodson was wary. "Although I wasn not all that crazy about getting off on a

---

[42] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, 8.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

mechanical device, my motto is to always try everything at least once," Dodson said.[45] Her hesitation demonstrates how deeply ingrained the anti-technology ethos was in the 1960s and 1970s. Fetishization of the "natural" was occurring, and an electric vibrator was diametrically opposed to this philosophy. To corrupt the "natural" act of sex by enhancing it through a man-made device was widely considered anathema among many, like public intellectual Lewis Mumford who "wanted technology to be organic rather than mechanistic."[46] But her first experience with the Oster was so intense that she overcame any philosophical justifications for not enjoying the vibrator. "I gasped when his fingers made contact with my clitoris and in moments, the orgasm I had was so powerful I was terrified!"[47] And she was aided in her change of heart by the design of the Oster itself. "I was able to rationalize that since his fingers were touching me, it was still skin on skin- so it was probably okay to use the vibrator from time to time," Dodson said.[48]

Dodson began masturbating with the vibrator soon after, and Taylor was thrilled, as her sexual appetite had exhausted him. "He wanted to watch the ball game and I wanted to have more orgasms," she said. She began to experiment with another vibrator, a gun-shaped device with vibrating attachments, also used in barbershops. These vibrators were reminiscent of the ones from the early 1900s, minus the penis-shaped attachments of course. It was not as satisfying: "It was way too intense and my orgasm came much too fast."[49]

---

[45] Betty Dodson, "Having Sex with Machines: The Return of the Electric Vibrator," Dodson and Ross, June 8, 2010, accessed on May 5, 2014, http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/betty-dodson/2010/06/having-sex-machines-return-electric-vibrator
[46] Thomas Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm* (New York: Viking, 1989), 447.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Betty Dodson, "Having Sex with Machines."
[49] Ibid.

As Dodson had been exploring her sexuality through practicing with her lover, as well as many other lovers that she had as part of their open relationship, she had also been exploring it through her art, painting images of nudes. In November 1968, she had her first show at the Wickersham Gallery in New York City, the same year that women liberationists protested the Miss America pageant. Although not a formally trained artist—she entered art school in 1956, but quit after a year—she had talent and an appreciation for the human form. The show displayed drawings of her having sex with her lover, Grant Taylor, and another lover, Roy.[50] Dodson attend the art opening dressed in full-on dominatrix style, without even knowing what a dominatrix was. Clad in black leggings with a "jeweled chain belt" and "black leather-riding crop," she created quite an image in the staid art world.[51] The show was a resounding success. Within the two weeks of the exhibition, 8,000 people came to see drawings of Dodson having sex. But what affected Dodson the most were the stories patrons were telling her about their own sex lives. One man took her aside and whispered that he had "the same disease as the model in one of your pictures."[52] The "disease" he was referring to was that of having a curved penis. He did not realize the variations in male genitals. Although a woman displaying erotic art in the late 1960's was controversial enough, two years later she had an even more controversial show.

In the meantime, Dodson had become active in the women's movement. On August 26, 1970, she participated in the Women's Strike for Equality in New York City, a celebration of the "fiftieth anniversary of the ratification of the women's suffrage amendment." Organized by Friedan, this "strike" occurred around the country, and the strikers had "three central demands: the right to abortion, the right to child care, and equal opportunity in employment and

---

[50] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 84.
[51] Ibid., 85.
[52] Ibid., 187.

education."[53] But from the beginning Dodson's ideas were different from those of the other feminists. While they were marching for equal pay and fairer marital relationships, she "was marching for women's freedom to choose how we wanted to have sex."[54] By the end of the month like many other women who had been inspired by the strike, she had attended her first National Organization of Women (NOW) meeting, but it did not impress her.[55] She felt alienated from the upper class, conservatively dressed women there who were more interested in discussing sex discrimination than sexual pleasure. Yet Dodson wanted to partner with the women's movement in some way. So she visited a local women's center and talked with a group of radical feminists. New York was the epicenter of radical feminism at the time. The New York Radical Women group was formed in 1967. These feminists were less conservative than the NOW feminists, as they ascribed to a different ethos. As historian Carolyn Bronstein says, "Whereas NOW tried to advance equal rights for women without challenging the basic structures of American society, Women's Liberation aimed for social and political transformation."[56]

The New York Radical Women suggested that Dodson form a consciousness raising (CR) group. These groups involved women gathering in each other's homes to discuss women's health and social status, including taboo topics like abortion, reproduction, incest, or genital anatomy. In CR groups, radical feminists critiqued heterosexuality and argued that traditional gender roles led to male domination over women. Bronstein says that radical feminists " argued that all forms of social domination, including the oppression of women, originated from male supremacy. Men exploited and victimized women, primarily exerting their power through sexuality, through the heterosexual institutions of romantic love, marriage, the family, sexual

---

[53] Rosen, *World Split Open,* 92.
[54] Ibid, 97.
[55] "Now's ranks swelled by 50 percent," according to Rosen, 93.
[56] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 40-41.

violence, and through the sexual objectification of women in mass media images, including pornography."[57]

CR groups got their start in 1968, as an offshoot of "the radical feminist scene in New York City…quickly spreading to other radical feminist cells around North America."[58] These groups were informed by the NYRW's Carol Hanisch who created the catchphrase "The personal is political." According to Rosen, Hanisch "meant to convey the then-shocking idea that there were political dimensions to private life, that power shaped life in marriage, in the kitchen, the bedroom, the nursery, and at work."[59] The ethos of CR groups was women gaining power through sharing their experiences with other women and discovering that their experiences were normal. Michelle Murphy calls consciousness raising a "discursive and a social technology," where women shared their experiences, which "were then analyzed…to chart the social conditions common to women as an oppressed group."[60] For most CR groups, the end goal was to figure out the social causes of women's oppression and work to change these social conditions.

Some CR groups discussed sexual pleasure and the importance of the clitoris, but few were devoted solely to sexual pleasure, as reproductive rights like abortion had more salience in feminism, since it was still illegal in most of the country before *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. In her CR group, Dodson learned that "many of the women knew very little about sexual pleasure, and several admitted they'd never had an orgasm."[61] But the CR group was not fully satisfying to Dodson because she did not believe in the overarching philosophy of CR groups that "men and

---

[57] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 43.
[58] Michelle Murphy, "Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 124.
[59] Rosen, *World Split Open,* 196.
[60] Ibid., 125.
[61] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 98.

their perpetuation of male supremacy through the male role…was directly responsible for the oppression of women."[62]

Her next art show was fast approaching, and she still did not have a theme yet. Her first completed painting for the show was of a couple having missionary-style sex, but she quickly shifted focus to a series of "Sex-Role Cartoons." In these paintings, she showed men having sex with women while ignoring the clitoris. Each painting featured a dichotomy of traditional women's roles like "Madonna/Whore" and "Child/Woman." For example, the top half of the Madonna/Whore image showed a woman nursing her child and the bottom half showed her reddened genitals getting penetrated by a penis.[63] After creating a series of eight "cartoons" she decided that she would contrast the images with another series of women masturbating. It was clitoral sex vs. non-clitoral sex facing off in the gallery. (Figures 5 and 6)

But when her images of masturbating women showed up at the gallery, the director, Andre, who had seen these drawings before, had a change of heart. He told Dodson that she could not show them. A fight ensued, and finally they arrived at a compromise: she could show two of the masturbating drawings.[64] One was "a six-foot drawing of [Dodson's] girlfriend—legs apart, clitoris erect, approaching orgasm with her vibrator."[65] It was this drawing that caused the most controversy. Men took Dodson aside and said, "If that was my woman, she wouldn't have to use that thing."[66] They would ask if the woman in the picture had a boyfriend to which Dodson would reply, "Yes, and he's standing over there." Women told Dodson that they were

---

[62] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 43-44.
[63] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 101.
[64] Ibid.*,* 104-105.
[65] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, 12.
[66] Ibid., 13.

afraid of using vibrators because they thought they would get addicted to them.[67] That this attitude prevailed at the height of the sexual revolution is not terribly surprising. That a fear of masturbation and vibrators persisted among the self-selected group of "sexually enlightened" people who attended Dodson's erotic art show was. This was the beginning of Dodson's uphill battle to win acceptance for vibrators during the sexual revolution.

Her gallery show and the negative response to it led her to her masturbation philosophy. "The two weeks I spent in the gallery made it very clear that repression relates directly to masturbation. It follows then that masturbation can be important in reversing the process and achieving liberation."[68] For Dodson, as well as many other radical feminists, women's liberation was impossible without sexual freedom, and sexual freedom was impossible without both knowledge and practice of masturbation. She summed up her philosophy this way:

> If I couldn't touch my own body for pleasure, I was a victim hoping to get the kind of sex from a partner, who would provide adequate stimulation of my clitoris that lasted long enough for me to have an orgasm. Even if that happened, I would still be dependent on each lover for all my orgasms. This kind of sexual dependency led to resentments, which fueled the war between the sexes.[69]

According to Dodson's philosophy, people's knowledge of sexuality begins with masturbation, and if they do not know how to bring themselves pleasure, they cannot take control of their own sexuality. Masturbation laid the groundwork for future sexual pleasure, whether solo or partnered. People would be unable to have successful sexual relationships without knowing how to give themselves orgasms because they would not be able to transmit that knowledge to their partners, she said.

Dodson was furious that women were taught to believe in the Freudian view that they should graduate away from the "immature" clitoral orgasm and into the "mature" vaginal

---

[67] Ibid.
[68] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation,* 13.
[69] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars*, 105.

orgasm as they became adults. She was not the first feminist to advocate for the clitoral orgasm, but she was the only one to focus all of her attention on it and advocate for masturbation as the most important way to achieve one.

Many other feminists turned the results of Masters and Johnson's findings that all orgasms are clitoral into a rallying cry to demolish existing gender and sexual roles, but Dodson's approach was more focused on sexual pleasure than the other approaches. Feminist Anne Koedt's 1973 essay argued that the myth of the vaginal orgasm had been perpetuated by both men and women. Men wanted to perpetuate the myth because they enjoyed penetrative sex, wanted to control women's sexuality, thought of women as subordinate, and were afraid that clitoral orgasms would make men expendable. Women perpetuated it because they had a desire to please men and were ignorant about the functions of their genitals. Koedt lacked a practical solution to getting the two sexes to agree to retire the myth of the vaginal orgasm, while other feminists proffered practical institutional and political changes.[70] Alix Kates Shulman argued Americans should transform sex education teaching so that the clitoris, not the vagina, was described as women's primary sexual organ and that laws should be changed so that missionary-style sex that left women without orgasms was not considered to be the norm.[71] But aside from Dodson, no other feminist saw Masters and Johnson's findings as a call for masturbation.

Dodson's focus on sexual pleasure was controversial within the women's movement, where many feminists believed that a focus on orgasms and sexual pleasure divorced from emotional connection was a "male-identified" and anti-feminist form of sexuality.[72] The Boston

---

[70] Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," in *Radical Feminism,* ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, 198-207 (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973).
[71] Alix Kates Shulman, "Organs and Orgasms," In *Women in a Sexist Society,* edited by V. Gornick and B. Moran (New York: Signet, 1971).
[72] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 39-40 .

Women's Health Collective (BWHC) espoused this view while advocating for masturbation in their seminal 1970 booklet *Women and Their Bodies: A Course*, which went on to be published as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1971. (Figure 7) Although they promoted clitoral stimulation and masturbation, and argued that that all orgasms are clitoral, they said that "Orgasms are not that important in life. What are important are loving, giving, free relationships between people."[73] They mentioned in passing that some women masturbated with electric vibrators either on their clitorises or inserted inside them. But the BWHC's focus was more on relationships than sexual pleasure. Much of their booklet was devoted to birth control.[74]

Dodson's art show did not change mainstream feminist thought, however. Her show was not as well-attended as the first one, she sold none of her drawings, and she received only one review, in *New York* magazine. So she decided to take another approach. She published an article called "Masculine Mystique" in *Screw,* provocateur Al Goldstein's weekly pornographic magazine primarily directed towards heterosexual men, where she explained that women had difficulty having orgasms from standard missionary-style sex, and she criticized men's porn for not focusing on clitoral pleasure. But few feminists read *Screw*, so her article did not have much of an impact. An article in Barney Rossett's avant-garde *Evergreen Review* followed in 1971, where she spoke out against feminists' anti-pornography stance and argued that feminists should create their own porn. The feminist establishment took notice, and *Ms.* magazine called her to ask her to write an article on masturbation that same year. Dodson penned an article where she

---

[73] Boston Women's Health Collective, *Women and Their Bodies: A Course* (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1970), 16.

[74] Boston Women's Health Collective, *Women and Their Bodies*, 22-23, 26. Started in 1969 by 12 feminists who met at a women's liberation conference seminar on health, BWHC's women were dissatisfied with the medical establishment, which they felt was too patriarchal. The BWHC decided to produce a resource for women to learn about reproduction, sexuality, and general bodily health. And it eventually became a best-seller after it was published by New England Free Press in 1971 with the new title: *Our Bodies, Our Selves*.

fully articulated her masturbation philosophy and advocated for the use of vibrators, but *Ms.* rejected it, fearing that an article promoting masturbation would offend its readers.[75]

This was the beginning of *Ms.* magazine's conflicted view towards vibrators and masturbation, an attitude related to *Ms.* magazine's brand of feminism, known as "cultural feminism" a type of feminisms that was at odds with Dodson's "radical feminism." Alice Echols explains: " In the terminology of today, radical feminists were typically social constructionists who wanted to render gender irrelevant, while cultural feminists were general essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness."[76] Masturbation and a celebration of sexual pleasure for its own sake was perceived as male-identified among many cultural feminists. The right to sexual pleasure was subordinated to reproductive rights in the cultural feminist consciousness. [77] However, the radical feminists did not necessarily think that being male-identified was a bad thing because they were "mobilizing women on the basis of their similarity to men."[78] Even among radical feminists, a pro-sex attitude was not the norm. The organized pro-sex feminist movement did not form until 1982 with a conference at Barnard College in New York, a conference whose purpose was "to reintroduce questions of sexual pleasure."[79] Even this was a highly controversial conference with anti-porn feminists protesting out front.

Because *Ms.* would not publish her article, Dodson decided instead to read it at her consciousness raising group. It was a big hit. All the women wanted copies of it. She printed it as a pamphlet, renaming it "Betty Dodson Speaks Out About Erotic Art, Masturbation, and Women's Liberation." On the first page of the 18-page pamphlet she featured her drawing of a

---

[75] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars*, 110-112; 166-167.
[76] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6-8.
[77] Ibid.,6.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 298.

woman masturbating with a Panabrator electric vibrator with the words "Liberating Masturbation" underneath. This was the first public association of vibrators with women's liberation. While the vibrator in the drawing was manufactured by Panasonic ostensibly for back massage, it had now been rebranded by Dodson as a symbol of sexual independence.[80]

Soon after she concocted her next idea: To start a sexual consciousness raising group with a very specific goal: "It was my intention to introduce electric vibrators to women, and in the process, transform the women's movement into a tidal wave of orgasmic activists who would change the world," Dodson said.[81] What distinguished her group from the other CR groups of the time was that women would actually be having sex at the meetings. Many CR groups involved women examining their genitals with speculums and discussing sexual functions, but Dodson took these techniques a step further. To begin her sexual consciousness raising group, Dodson decided to invite the most sexually liberated women she knew: the friends she had been having group-sex parties with. They came over and discussed their experiences at orgies. What she learned was disheartening to her.

> What surprised me was the admission by about a third of the group that they didn't particularly like group sex. They were looking or longing for their own romantic version of 'ideal love', and in the meantime tolerating group sex because their husbands or boyfriends wanted or insisted on swinging.[82]

If the most sexually liberated women in the women's movement were not having orgasms, and were instead seeking to appease their male partners, Dodson thought, then how were the rest of the women getting by? Dodson also recalled hearing women make fake sexual moans during the orgies she attended while they were having vaginal sex with men. She thought that she could solve the problem of women's disappointing group sex experiences by organizing a variation of

---

[80] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 169-170.
[81] Dodson, "Having Sex With Machines: The Return of the Electric Vibrator."
[82] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, 20-21

a CR group: an "all-female orgy." Half of the women from the group came, some armed with porn and others with vibrators. "We exchanged masturbation techniques and vibrators, doing ourselves first and then each other," Dodson said.[83] Everybody had an orgasm. But it took three years for her to discover that she had a great business idea.

Inviting women to your house and teaching them to masturbate was a radical idea, even by radical feminist standards. It was one thing to talk about sex in consciousness raising groups, but quite another thing to have sex. And to charge for a CR group was basically unheard of. But Dodson's CR group did hew to some of the radical feminist principles, especially the belief among them that "women's experiences, not research produced by physicians, represented the most empowering, most liberating source of knowledge."[84] She was helping form sexual knowledge away from the medical establishment.

One way that she insured that only the truly open-minded would show up was by holding all her workshops in the nude and requiring that the participants do the same. Dodson did not waste any time. She answered the door naked, and she asked each participant to do the same. As participants sat in a circle naked, they discussed their insecurities about their bodies. "I hate my body," they would say, as Dodson assured them that she used to feel the same way. She used the CR group technique of empowerment through sharing "commonalities" among women.[85] As all the women realized their feelings of insecurity were shared, they felt stronger. To overcome their insecurities, they had to face their fears by gazing at their bodies in their mirror, Dodson told them. As they stood in front of the mirror, she would tell them to stand "up straight with your

---

[83] Ibid, 21.
[84] Wendy Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 210), 42.
[85] Murphy says that this empowered women because they saw each other "as agents capable of judging large-scale social structures and of conducting a scientific analysis of themselves," ("Immodest Witnessing," 127).

head up, shoulders back, pelvises tucked under, genitals forward."[86] After some yoga and breathing exercises, Dodson would masturbate in front of them with her different vibrator. Then she would give them their homework assignment: masturbate with or without a vibrator. For women who wanted vibrators, she would let them borrow some or she would direct them to a newly formed women's-owned sex-toy store, Eve's Garden.

In the second session, they would discuss their masturbation experiences. About half of the women usually had had orgasms, but many were not sure if what they had was actually an orgasm. So Dodson would explain what an orgasm feels like, and then she would show how to use vibrators during penetrative sex, using her female assistant as a surrogate sex partner.

The third weekly sessions was where she began to teach women to get over their "genital shame" and become "cunt positive." "It was Dodson's way of fighting against women's belief that their genitals were "ugly, funny looking, disgusting, smelly, and not at all desirable."[87] Taking a cue from the women's health movement, Dodson would pass out plastic speculums, mirrors, and flashlights to her participants. CR groups believed seeing the variety of genitals reduced women's shame. While women marveled at the variety of the lengths of labia, and the differing sizes of the clitoris, Dodson explained that the female sexual pleasure centers were located on these areas and not deep within the well of the vagina. [88] Dodson's take on vaginal exams was not unusual. "Sexuality and sexual function, in contrast to public presentations or self-help clinics, were frequently the topics of advanced self-help groups," Murphy says, but Dodson's focus on public masturbation was unusual because "the feminist self-help movement purposefully steered clear of sexualizing vaginal self-exam in large presentations meant to

[86] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation,* 30.
[87] Ibid, 10.
[88] Other CR groups had similar discussions about the myth of the vaginal orgasm, but the women in this groups did not masturbate in front of each other (Murphy, "Immodest Witnessing,"131).

broadly appeal, thereby legitimizing the act for women who were threatened by homoeroticism."[89] Dodson also told the participants who were gazing at their vaginas to tighten their PC muscles to get pleasurable sensations.

It was in the final week of her workshops where Dodson diverged from feminist self-help orthodoxy the most. This is when participants masturbated in a circle with vibrators, having orgasms in a group. Most of the women in the group were avowedly heterosexual, so this pseudo homosexual experience could have made them uncomfortable. But their group orgasms had a certain form of power. Dodson used feminist conscious raising techniques to transform female masturbation into a group experience, normalizing and eroticizing masturbation, while also demolishing the myth that masturbation was antisocial or a last-resort sexual activity when a partner was not available. Yet she took this one step further and normalized masturbating with a mass-produced mechanical device, which was no small feat in the midst of the free-love hippie ethos. "The sixties and seventies feminists that I knew were dedicated to having sex within a loving meaningful relationship. Even lesbian separatists were NOT interested in having sex with a machine!" Dodson said.[90]

Dell Williams and The Rise of the Feminist Sex-Toy Store

It was 1970 and the 48-year-old Dell Williams was terrified. She traipsed up the steps to Betty Dodson's New York City apartment wondering whether she would have the nerve to participate in one of Dodson's workshops. When a completely naked Dodson answered the door, Williams had second thoughts. Should she turn and flee? Williams was comfortable with her body, but showing it off to a group of strange women was a different story. Dodson asked her to take off her clothes immediately and hang them on one of the 15 hooks she had strategically

[89] Murphy, "Immodest Witnessing," 132.
[90] Betty Dodson, "Having Sex with Machines."

installed at the front of her entranceway. Dodson did not want to give women a chance to think about taking off their clothes because the more time she gave them to think, the more likely they would have second thoughts. Williams dutifully followed Dodson and found her in a room full of nude women. Blue pillows were strewn around the floor for the participants to get comfortable. Williams and the other women stared at their naked bodies in the mirror. It was an empowering experience, possibly even a life-changing one. Then Dodson took out an oblong device, plugged it into the electrical outlet, cranked up its dial, and placed it to her clitoris. A wave of pleasure washed over her face. Williams watched as the naked Dodson vibrated herself to a powerful orgasm. Williams wondered where she could get the machine that gave orgasms at the flick of the switch. [91]

Weighing nearly a pound and a half, and running on 110 volt current, the Hitachi Magic Wand was an unlikely candidate to become the unofficial symbol of the sex-toy revolution. (Figure 8) Its handle was nearly a foot long and the massage applicator looked like a flattened tennis ball. There was nothing revolutionary about the design. It did not look like a penis. It was not inserted in the vagina. It was meant for external stimulation only. And its manufacturer was not a sleazy sex-toy company seeking the bottom line. It was a respected manufacturer of electronic goods who never admitted their product was a sex toy. The Panabrator and its cousin the Hitachi Magic Wand were blank canvases for sex-positive feminists to write their ideology.

Naturally the next day Williams wanted to get a Magic Wand for herself. But sex-toy stores did not really exist at this time, instead there were adult bookstores stocked with pornography with a few cheaply made battery-operated phallic vibrators hidden under the counter. They would not have carried the wand, nor would they be the type of place a woman

---

[91] Dell Williams and Lynn Vannucci, *Revolution in the Garden: Memoirs of the Gardenkeeper* (Silver Back Books, 2010), 140-145.

would enter alone. They were clearly men's spaces. So Williams went to Macy's, a store that had been stocking vibrators under the guise of medical devices since 1910.[92] Yet a vital change had occurred since this time: the patina of health device had worn thin, and thanks to Dodson and others, the vibrator, which had been masquerading as a medical device for a century, had suddenly been outed as an orgasm machine. Not that people had not known this previously, but they just rarely discussed it. And they certainly had not co-opted vibrators as symbols for empowerment.

Williams asked the two-decades younger sales clerk if he could direct her to where the "body massagers" were. "What do you want it for?" he crowed "loudly enough that people turned to look." To which she "mumbled something about having a bad back." She ended up buying the vibrator, but not without "a sense of guilt and shame." It was this feeling of embarrassment, along with the empowerment she had felt at Dodson's workshop that laid the foundation for her sex-toy store. [93]

Williams was working at an advertising agency at the time, so she had an acute sense that the vibrator was a product that needed a rebranding, starting with a better retail environment. So Williams asked her friends who owned small boutiques to start selling the Wand in their stores. Nobody had the courage to do it.

1973 National Organization of Women Sexuality Conference

In the meantime, Williams had been active in NOW, and she increasingly believed that sexual liberation was key to women's liberation. In 1973, Williams decided to co- organize the

---

[92] Jan. Sale of Drugs Toilet and Manicure Goods ad, Macy's Department Store, January 26, 1910, *New York Times,* 7.
[93] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden*, 146.

first NOW sexuality conference with Laura Scharf. [94] Since the conference centered on sex, it was controversial from the beginning. Many members thought that the women's movement should not be focused on sexual pleasure. "Some of my sisters dismissed the significance of the conference because of 'our many political struggles.' If freeing ourselves from sexual imprisonment is not political, I don't know what is," Williams said. Using the logic of 2nd-wave feminists that "the personal is political," Williams argued for the importance of a NOW conference on sex:

> We are exploring and defining and celebrating our OWN sexuality. For me, this is political. Indeed, it may be revolutionary (causing or tending to produce revolution). If our sexual oppression is political then overthrowing that oppression is also political…Sexual repression has been used long enough to inhibit freedom of action. Freeing our sexual energy and expanding our human potential, could lead to a pleasure-based society, instead of a power-based society.[95]

This was only the beginning of the controversy for Williams. She asked Dodson to draw the flyer for the conference, and Dodson agreed. Dodson came up with an image that was a homage to Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Although intended as a triumphant demonstration of women's sexuality, the nude, muscled woman splayed on top of a vagina caused an enormous amount of controversy among the NYC-NOW chapter. Much of the controversy centered on the woman's clitoris, which many women mistook for a penis because they thought it was too large. Dodson reduced the size of the clitoris for the poster version of the flyer. She argued that she was trying to create a new image of women in culture, one that was not the "classical image of woman. You know, the curves and all that."[96] (Figure 9)

---

[94] Ibid., 148-152.
[95] Dell Williams, "To Explore, Define, and Celebrate Our Sexuality," *Women's Sexuality Conference Proceedings* (New York: National Organization of Women New York Chapter, 1974), 6.
[96] Betty Dodson, Speak Out, *Women's Sexuality Conference Proceedings* (New York: National Organization of Women New York Chapter, 1974), 10.

Judy Wenning, the president of NYC-NOW, defended Dodson's poster in her keynote speech: " I have heard a lot of complaints about the drawing, done by Betty Dodson, which is on the flyer and poster… The body on this conference poster is a strong, functional body. I think it's a body that this woman would be enjoying," Wenning said.[97]

But it was Dodson's workshop and slideshow at the NYC NOW conference that caused the most controversy. Dodson's promotion of masturbation remained controversial among the cultural feminists at NOW. But Dodson and other pioneers like Terry Garrity, the author of the best-selling erotic novel *The Sensuous Woman* (1969), were helping transform the status of masturbation. As Laqueur argues, during the 1960s and 1970s, "For the first time in human history, masturbation was embraced as a mode of liberation, a claim to autonomy, to pleasure for its own sake, an escape from the socially prescribed path toward normal adulthood."[98]

Dodson's body sex workshops had not allowed her to reach a large enough group of feminists to have an impact. It was not until she presented her vibrator workshops to the NOW Sexuality Conference that she succeeded in creating a market for the vibrator, a market that would only increase throughout the decade.

Dodson Speaks Up

"I'm probably hooked on my vibrator. I'm probably going steady with it, but I'll worry about that later. I don't know. That's the latest feedback I get, 'You're hooked on your vibrator.' And I say, ''Listen, what can I say ?' I've got four with me at the conference…and I mean it's like a groove. I change them over. Actually, the reason I do that is that they get hot and you have to change over to the next one. Wait till we start designing vibrators. It'll be a trip," declared

---

[97] Judy Wenning, Speech, *Women's Sexuality Conference Proceedings* (New York: National Organization of Women New York Chapter, 1974), 8-9.
[98] Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 397.

Betty Dodson as she stood at the podium at the NOW Sexuality Conference on June 9, 1973.[99] These were fighting words. Not only was she admitting publicly that she liked to masturbate, but she was also saying that she used a marginalized technology to do so. And she was unapologetic about it, dismissing the fear of "vibrator addiction" that so many women had. Her aside about feminists designing vibrators was prescient. While it took a decade for women to start designing vibrators, they did begin designing dildos six years later. (Figure 10)

Dodson gave this address at a "speak out," where she also described her unhappy marriage, laid out her philosophy of the liberating power of masturbation, and urged women to get over their genital shame. She finished her speech by telling women to come to her "Liberating Masturbation and Orgasm" workshop later in the day.

That afternoon the workshop was packed, with women milling around in the hallways of the repurposed high-school auditorium, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of an enthusiastic Dodson. After a short discussion, Dodson removed three vibrators from her briefcase, "Wasting no time, she plugged them in, held them up for display, and began to discourse on the fine points of each vibrator—when used not for muscle relaxing but for sexual pleasure." The plug-in vibrators that she was displaying would go on to become symbols of liberation for many feminists.[100] (Figure 11 and 12)

Yet she also displayed battery-operated phallic vibrators, which is the device that would have come to most people's minds if they heard the word "vibrator." These penis-shaped vibrators were the only kind of vibrators available in sex-toy stores frequented by men. Dodson

---

[99] Video of Dodson and Others Reading a Transcript of 1973 New York National Organization of Women Conference, accessed May 1, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6oAGPA8MSs

[100] Ruth Rovner, "Women's Sexuality Conference: A Vibrator Connoisseur," *Los Angeles Free Press,* July 20, 1973, 13-14. Reprinted in *Women's Sexuality Conference Proceedings* (New York: National Organization of Women New York Chapter, 1974), 55-56.

called these, "a man's idea of what a woman wants in a vibrator." She was dismissive of the battery-operated vibrators' ability to give women orgasms, and some in the audience agreed. One woman even complained at that "the battery runs out at the wrong time."[101]

Although some of the women at the workshop had used vibrators before, several had never even heard of vibrators. Convincing women to use plug-in vibrators required Dodson to demolish the vibrator stigma. She did this by tackling one of the biggest fears of potential vibrator users: that they would have such amazing orgasms with vibrators that they would no longer be interested in sex with men. Dodson told the participants that they could use vibrators during sex, and that contrary to popular belief, men would welcome vibrators because they would "relieve the pressure" on men to provide women with orgasms. If a woman uses a vibrator during sex, Dodson argued, the man could "relax more…and not be so intent on what he must do to bring her to orgasm."[102]

She ended the workshop by setting up a small vibrator shop. She put two models of vibrators on a table and plugged them in, allowing women to feel the vibrations. (Figure 13) Her inventory of the wand-shaped Panabrators and gun-shaped Preludes sold out within a half hour.[103] While the Panabrator was not openly marketed as a sex toy, the Prelude was. Prelude's distributor, Tex Williams, had asked Dodson to be his spokeswoman and Williams to host a vibrator booth at the next NOW event. Prelude wanted to go after the feminist market, and what better way to do this than by peddling their sex toys at NOW events? But both Williams and Dodson declined because it heated up too fast, and the handle got so hot that Dodson had to wear a potholder while using it. The poor design of the Prelude was surprising considering that the

---

[101] Rovner, "Women's Sexuality Conference,"13.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 180-182

Kinsey Institute's Wardell Pomeroy had helped fund the Prelude company.[104] Dodson would have promoted Panasonic's vibrator the Panabrator, but Panasonic did not want to admit that their massagers were being used as sex toys, so she was never asked.

The next day, Dodson presented a slideshow of women's vulvas that she called, "Creating a Female Genital Aesthetic." Although she wanted to call the presentation "split-beaver for feminists," she was dissuaded because of feminist animosity to pornography**.** Dodson's embrace of sexual images of women was particularly controversial as many in the feminist movement were repulsed by pornography, although the organized opposition to pornography did not begin until the late 1970s, with the formation of Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media in 1976 and Women Against Pornography in 1979.[105] Even though Dodson celebrated the female body in a positive way, her images were inspired by pornographic magazines, a trope she subverted by calling her slideshow "split beaver for feminists." But not all feminists were anti-pornography or anti-sex. The feminist pro-sex discourse was in its infancy but a few prominent works had recently been published. Germaine Greer's *Female* Eunuch (1970) urged women to abandon monogamy and get in touch with their vast sexuality[106] And in her novel *Fear of Flying* (1973) Erica Jong advocated for "the zipless fuck," no-strings-attached sex, sans marriage or even romance.[107]

Dodson wanted women to recognize the wide variation of vulvas and clitorises and be inspired to recognize that their genitals were "normal." As her drawings of her friends' genitals were projected on the screen, Dodson lovingly gave them names like "Classical Cunt." But

---

[104] Jane Juffer, *At Home With Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life (*New York: New York University Press, 1998), 90.
[105] Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 2.
[106] Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: Paladin, 1970).
[107] Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Henry Holt, 1973).

controversy ensued. "When I showed the 'Baroque cunt' a large woman stood up with her hands on her hips and bellowed, 'We object to you using that word! We've heard enough of that kind of talk from men.'" Dodson was undeterred. "I'm sorry the word offends you, but saying it happens to turn me on, so I intend to keep using it," she said.[108] In spite of this brouhaha, Dodson received a standing ovation. But the lone dissenter presaged the trouble that was to come, as Dodson refused to kowtow to the feminist orthodoxy.

About a year after the NOW conference, in August 1974, *Ms.* magazine finally published Dodson's article on masturbation. But *Ms.* was so wary of publishing an article on masturbation that they required that Dodson write it in the first person so that the editors could distance themselves from Dodson's views and be able to pass off the article as one woman's opinion.[109] Dodson had wanted to include the opinions of other participants in the workshops, but *Ms.* had nixed that idea. Instead Dodson was "designated the lone masturbator."[110] *Ms.* also toned down her article title from "Liberating Masturbation" to "Getting to Know Me." Yet they accompanied the article with a nude image of Dodson arching her back in the yogic fish pose. The article laid out Dodson's story of childhood and adult masturbation, while advocating for masturbation as a way for women to overcome the double-standard that women were supposed to be monogamous caregivers and men polygamous. In Dodson's view, society reinforced the double-standard by "depriving [women] of direct sexual self-knowledge—especially masturbation." The only way to regain this knowledge was to "become very aware of our genitals." And the best way to do this, Dodson argued, was through masturbation. She told women how to masturbate, and she explained how she did it: using vibrators, of course: "I have found that the vibrator gives me the

---

[108] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars,* 182.
[109] Ibid., 217.
[110] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars*, 217.

strongest and most consistent form of stimulation and is especially good for women who have never experienced orgasm." [111]

At the end of her article, *Ms.* editor Harriet Lyons suggested she include a pitch promoting her book. So she included the following line: "The article was adapted from "Liberating Masturbation," which can be obtained by sending three dollars to Betty Dodson c/o *Ms.* magazine."[112] Dodson thought a few orders would come in but instead, thousands of orders rolled in, along with handwritten notes expressing women's appreciation that Dodson discussed masturbation so openly, and Dodson decided that an 18-page pamphlet was not sufficient. Instead, she expanded the work into a 60-page book, complete with 15 pages of her vulva drawings. Yet that meant that the over 2,000 readers who ordered a copy of *Liberating Masturbation* would have to wait for three months to get their copy of a book that hadn't been written yet. So *Ms.* sent out postcards to women that said, "Thank you for ordering 'Liberating Masturbation.' Due to a production delay, copies will be in the mail in October." Even the postcards themselves were controversial. "Instantly angry women wrote back, shocked that the word 'masturbation' had appeared on a postcard that could be seen by postal clerks, mailmen, and members of their family."[113] This response showed the state of masturbation in the women's movement. Even the select group of women brave enough to order a book on masturbation were terrified that other people would know about their purchase. The act of masturbation was still filled with shame. To read about it privately was one thing, but for your neighbors to know that you masturbated was still taboo.

---

[111] Betty Dodson, "Getting to Know Me," *Ms.* (August 1974), in ed. Jeffrey Escoffier, *Sexual Revolution* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003).
[112] Dodson, *My Romantic Love Wars*, 219.
[113] Ibid., 221.

Liberating Masturbation was part memoir, part self-help book, and part art monograph. It was a mash-up of her bodysex workshops, NOW slideshow, and vibrator workshop. In addition to the drawings of vuvlas, Dodson included multiple other drawings. She had drawings of women masturbating while gazing into mirrors, etches of penises, and diagrams of nude women doing yoga poses. The drawings served to educate women about the different styles of vulvas, to reduce their shame. And she included illustrations of women masturbating with vibrators, and two of women using vibrators while having penetrative sex with men to teach women how to do the same.

She began the book by sharing the story of her childhood and adult masturbation, and then launched into the kernel of her newly updated philosophy: that "sexuality and economics" are inextricably intertwined. "Ultimately [sexuality and economics] are not separable—not as long as the female genitals have economic value instead of sexual value for women. Saving sex for my lover/husband was my gift to him in exchange for economic security—called 'meaningful relationship' or 'marriage,'" she said. In that exchange, women lost, because they replaced orgasms with financial comfort. Marital sex rarely produced orgasms in women, she argued, because it was missionary style, and women had to resort to replacing their sexual feelings with romantic ones and forgo sexual pleasure. However, they also had to fake orgasm so as not to upset their male partners' egos. [114]

If, as Dodson argued, "sexual liberation was crucial to women's liberation" then it followed that "masturbation was crucial to sexual liberation and the destruction of paralyzing sex roles" because the current dependences on spouses for orgasms that rarely came, was a failure

[114] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation,* 2.

and an unfair exchange. [115] "To become responsible for our own orgasms is a basic statement about independence and establishes us as people with something worth sharing, " Dodson argued.[116]

Although masturbation "is our first natural sexual activity," Dodson said, "sexual skill and the ability to ability to respond are not 'natural' in our society." Instead, society had told women not to masturbate, thereby naturalizing repression. The norm in our society was a lack of sexual knowledge. Learning how to masturbate was the first step in correcting this lack. Only after a woman had learned how to bring herself to orgasm could she enjoy sex with a partner, Dodson said. Unlike other advocates of masturbation, however, Dodson did not think that masturbation was simply a stepping stone to sex with a partner or a second-rate sex act. She thought masturbation was a good in and of itself. Thomas Laqueur summed up Dodson's philosophy this way, "For Dodson, masturbation represents the true self, and we only need to ask for something from the public sphere if it offers a supplement to what we can have alone."[117]

In some ways, Dodson's thought was aligned with radical feminist thought. Like most radical feminists, her theories about masturbation aligned with what Jane Gerhard calls radical feminist theory's belief in "the political importance of women's sexual self-determination…Sexual freedom within second-wave feminism was about women actively determining what should happen to their bodies, about empowering women to feel entitled to their desires whatever they may be, and about transforming men…enough for them to listen and ideally change."[118] And Dodson's focus on the clitoris as the site of female sexual pleasure was also in line with much feminist thought, as it was grounded in psychiatrist Mary Sherfey's

---

[115] Ibid., 12.
[116] Ibid., 9.
[117] Laqueur, *Solitary Sex,* 402.
[118] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution,* 6.

dismantling of the Freudian idea of the vaginal orgasm.[119] However, Dodson's belief that orgasms and promiscuity were good in and of themselves were decidedly opposed to many radical feminists' beliefs that orgasms and sex without love were "male-identified" sexual behaviors that feminists should shun.[120]

In *Liberating Masturbation,* Dodson said that one of the best ways to masturbate was with a vibrator, but so many women were biased against the technology that she had to convince women that their entrenched attitudes were wrong. She did this by rhetorically transforming the vibrator from a soulless machine into a tool of empowerment by making masturbation a spiritual, emboldening experience and justifying the use of any machine to reach this sexual awakening. Even though openly marketed sex toys had just emerged in the cultural consciousness thanks to Masters and Johnson, but they were definitely still a fringe technology. Fears that surrounded vibrators mimicked many fears new technologies bring: that the technology will be dehumanizing, that it is dangerous, that it will threaten personal relationships.

"The vibrator has proven to be an excellent erotic toy for women," she said at the beginning of the vibrator section. "Many women who have never had an orgasm after years of love-making, have their first one with the vibrator."[121] But just offering her own assurances about the vibrator was not enough. So she quoted from workshop participants' experiences with vibrators, which is the information that the *Ms.* editors had demanded that she keep out. "It doesn't matter, you prefer your hand and I prefer the vibrator. I get a more intense orgasm from

---

[119] Rosen, *World Split Open,* 149.
[120] Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution,* 7.
[121] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation*, 48.

the vibrator, because it's stronger and more consistent," said one participant quoted in the book.[122]

Yet the prospect of an orgasm was not a convincing enough argument for many women in a society where women were still socialized to think that their sexual pleasure was subordinate to that of a man's. Dodson also had to assure women that their male partners would not be intimidated by vibrators. So she told women to use the vibrator as a test to weed out the "chauvinists." Any man who could not accept a vibrator was not a suitable mate, she intoned. If that was not enough to convince your partner, than there was always the choice of using it on him. She quoted one woman who says that she used her vibrator during intercourse with her boyfriend "and it drove him crazy, while another says that her male lover gave himself an orgasm with the vibrator. [123]

Women's fear that their male lovers would be intimidated by sex toys was not unwarranted. However, the fears usually centered on dildos. For example, a July 1973 Indiana Bar Exam contained the following question:

> At a state-owned and operated university in (or near) the Middle Western United States, Clytemnestra Toris is the only real thorn in the side of Mr. Strait Mouth, Dean of Students. Ms. (of course) Toris, a career student, who most recently has been pursuing a graduate degree in 'Mind-Leveling,' publishes and distributes on campus and environs a newspaper 'devoted to the elimination of all men.' Despite many counseling sessions she insists on calling her publication 'The Daily Dildo…'[124]

Female law students protested the question, but the damage had already been done. Clearly an association of dildos with man-hating feminists was already floating around in the culture for it to be recognizable enough to show up on a bar exam.

---

[122] Ibid., 28.
[123] Ibid., 1.
[124] "Women Protest Sexism on Bar Exam," *The Spokeswoman*, June 15, 1974, 5.

After a fear of male vibrator insecurity, the next greatest vibrator fear was that of addiction. Dodson tried to assuage this fear through comparing it to other addictions: "Of all my addictions—the vibrator is the mildest and least destructive of them all…it's not fattening, illegal, or immoral, Dodson said.[125] And she quoted a participant who said, "I was turned off because it was a mechanical device and I was afraid I'd get hooked on it," she said. Not only did the participant not get addicted, but she also learned to love her vibrator and her repurposed Mickey Mouse electric toothbrush.[126]

Liberating Masturbation received mixed reviews in feminist journals. Most feminists supported Dodson's ideas that masturbation would help women become less dependent on lovers for orgasms and more self-reliant, but many were critical of Dodson, nonetheless.[127] Lesbian feminists were the hardest on her, accusing her of heterosexism and ignoring lesbianism. An article by Kathy Hruby in the lesbian feminist journal *Amazon Quarterly* is characteristic. While supporting Dodson's overall philosophy, Hruby accused Dodson of being a closeted lesbian because she described herself as heterosexual, even though she had female "sexual buddies." Hruby also accused Dodson and of being "male-identified" and too focused on the orgasm.[128] Even feminist sadism and masochism (S&M) advocate Pat Califia, who was herself a controversial figure within the feminist movement for her belief that S&M and other sexual

---

[125] Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation,* 51.
[126] Ibid., 35.
[127] A positive review in *Big Mama Rag*, (February 1976, Vol. 4, Issue 2, p. 11) supports Dodson's project to make masturbation the center of sexual knowledge, but warns that "without a political analysis of the pleasure of orgasm, it may be used to placate women in their relationships with men, discouraging their consciousness of the political reality of these relationships." (Ibid.)
[128] Kathy Hruby, "Sexual Self-Help," *Amazon Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (March 1975), 61. Other lesbian journals recommended the book. In an article about masturbation in *Lesbian Connection* (n.a., 2, no. 3, July 1976, 2) Dodson's theories are espoused and her book is recommended.

power play was liberatory, criticized Dodson.[129] In an article titled "Lesbian Literature Meets the Sexual Revolution," in the lesbian-feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* Califia said, "Betty Dodson writes almost exclusively for and about women who relate sexually to men," and when she does write about lesbians, she "does not deal with the rewards of monogamy for two women or its value as a survival unit in a society hostile to lesbians."[130] Another feminist publication, *The Spokeswoman*, recommended *Liberating Masturbation* with a warning, "There's a danger, though, of confusing self-gratification with liberation."[131]

In some ways the criticism shows just how powerful Dodson's ideas were. Lesbian feminists felt threatened because Dodson did not follow the directives of the movement. She was an anti-monogamy hedonist who did not care if she appeared to be male identified. It was her iconoclasm that allowed her to look at a giant back massager and see the makings of a sex-toy revolution. But she could not create the revolution on her own. For vibrators to truly make inroads into female sexual culture, there had to exist a designated retail outlet for them. And by 1974 this outlet came to pass.

---

[129] For more on Califia and the feminist opposition to her pro-S&M lesbian organization, see Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 288- 307.
[130] Pat Califia, "Lesbian Literature Meets the Sexual Revolution," *Sinister Wisdom,* Issue 2 (Fall 1976), 68.
[131] "Liberating Masturbation," in" Worth Noting" *The Spokeswoman,* (March 15, 1975), vol. 5, 9.

Figure 1: Vivatone vibrator ad, *Amazing Stories,* June 1948, 175.

Figure 2: Oster Vibrator, Tyco Shop By Mail Catalog (1953), Dobbs Ferry, New York, 50. Source: Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Trade Literature Collection, Washington D.C.

Figure 3: Kenmore Vibrator, *Sears Christmas Book* (1956), 372.
Source: Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Trade Literature Collection, Washington D.C.

Figure 4: Photography of Betty Dodson at age 18 (taken in 1947 or 1948).
Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2014/04/18-year-old-betty

Figure 5: Betty Dodson posing with her paintings, 1969 or 1970.
Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2012/12/betty-her-art-studio

Figure 6: Dodson in her studio, 1969 or 1970.
Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2014/04/artist-activist

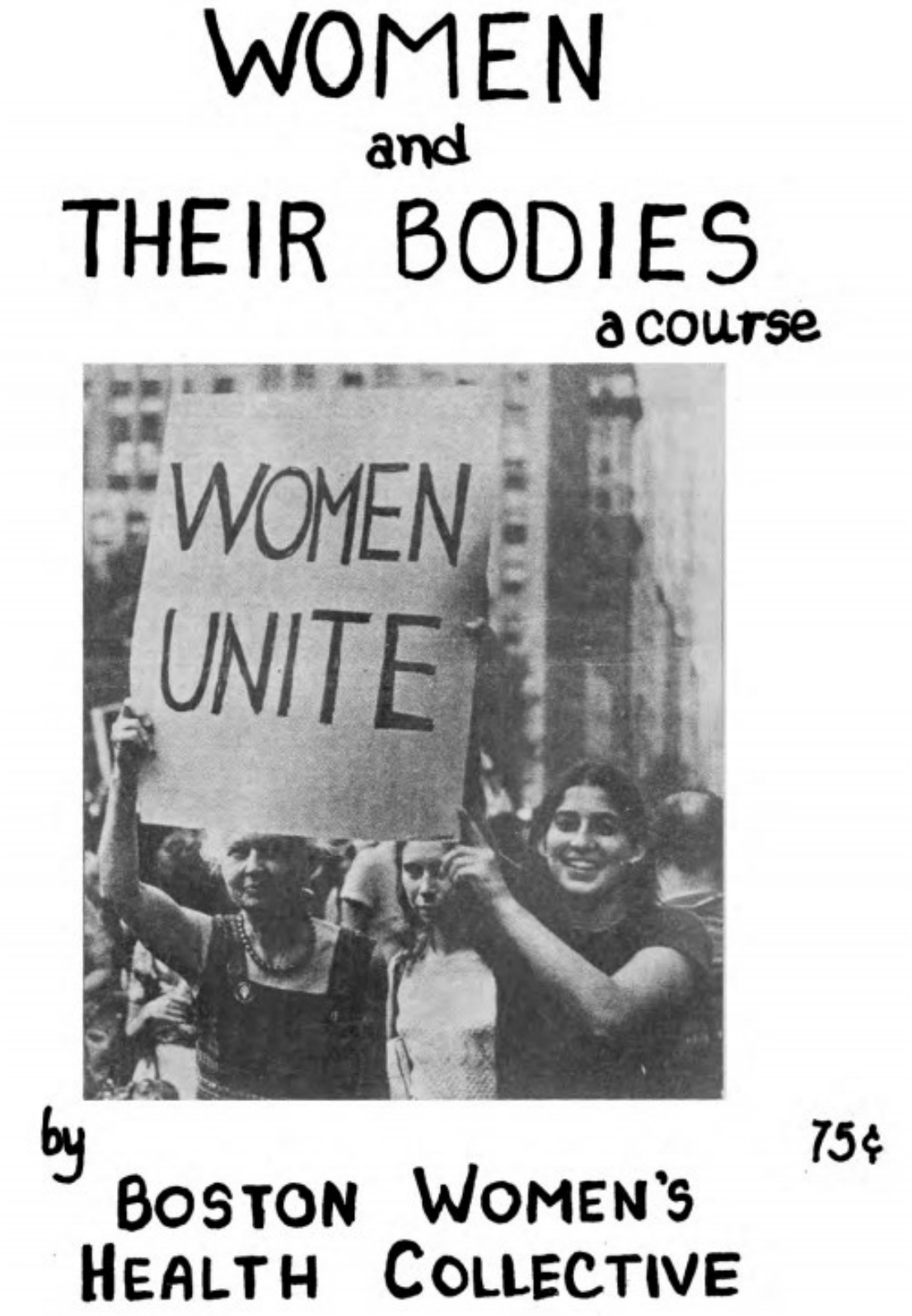


Figure 7: Cover of first version of what later became *Our Bodies, Our Selves,* 1970. Source: http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/

Figure 8: Hitachi Magic Wand, circa 1974 (top), circa mid 1980s-2012 (middle), and 2013-2014 (bottom). Source: http://magicwandoriginal.com/hitachi-magic-wand/

Figure 9: Controversial Cover of the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference 1973, drawn by Betty Dodson. Source: http://dodsonandross.com/sexfeature/split-beaver-slideshow-feminists

Figure 10: Dodson speaking at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference, 1973, New York.

Figure 11: Dodson working the crowd at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference, 1973. Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2013/02/betty-reintroducing-electric-vibrator-pleasure-device

Figure 12: Dodson explaining using vibrators to masturbate at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference in New York, 1973. Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2013/02/betty-reintroducing-electric-vibrator-pleasure-device

Figure 13: Dodson showing how to masturbate with an electric vibrator masturbate at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference in New York, 1973. Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2013/02/betty-reintroducing-electric-vibrator-pleasure-device

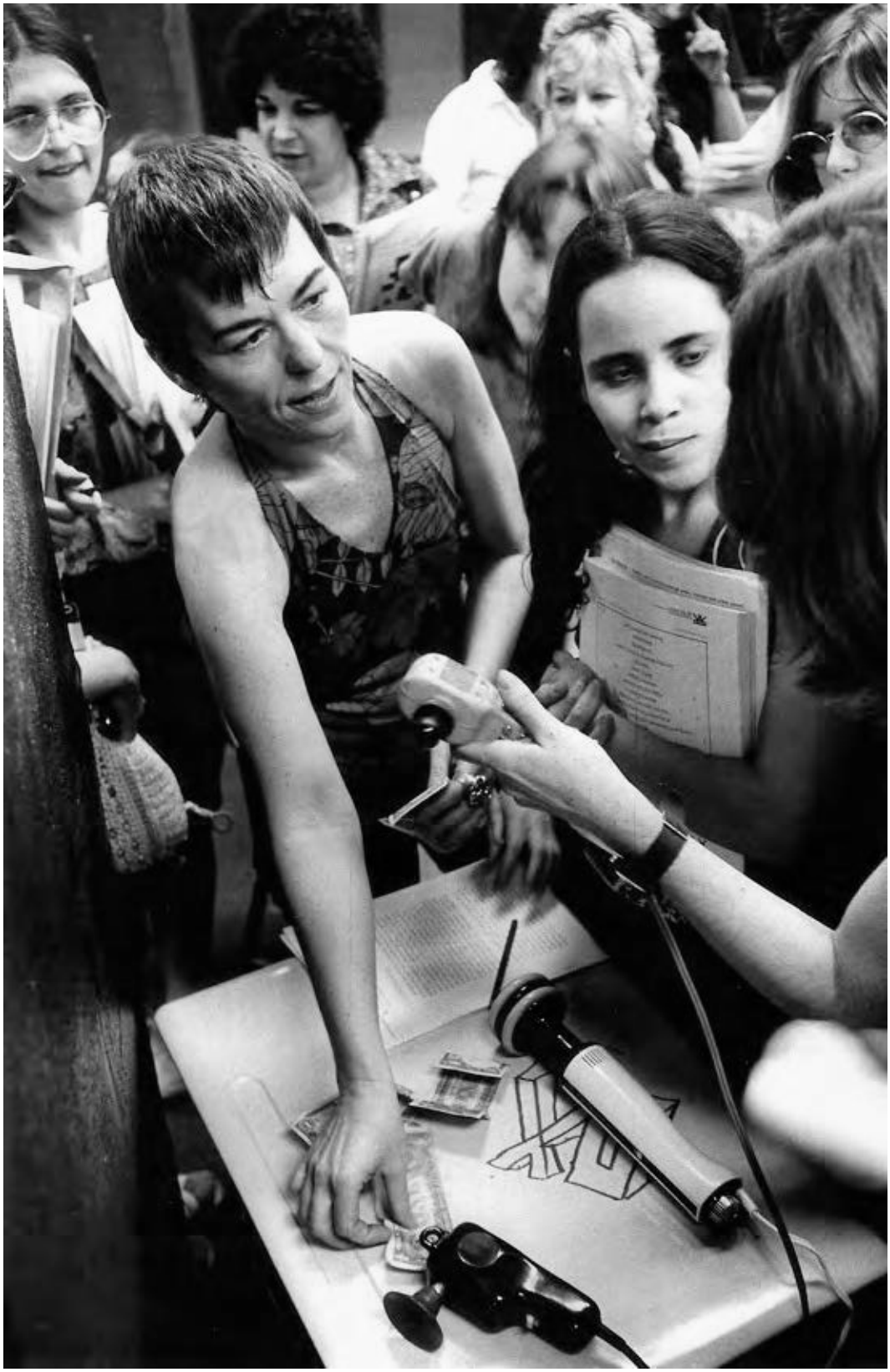


Figure 14: Dodson selling vibrators at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference in New York, 1973. Source: http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/carlin-ross/2013/02/betty-reintroducing-electric-vibrator-pleasure-device

Chapter 7: The Vibrator Becomes Political: Feminist Sex-Toy Stores and the Place of Sex Toys in the Women's Movement

Betty Dodson transformed many feminists' views of vibrators. No longer were vibrators embarrassing devices used by lonely, single women. Now they were liberatory tools used by empowered women: coupled and single alike. Yet changing conceptions of vibrators was not enough. Until women had tailored retail outlets where they could purchase vibrators, the vibrator's value would be in its symbolism not in its utility. Stores create meaning for the products they carry. And no matter how much Dodson advocated for vibrators' emancipatory powers, the fact remained that openly sexual vibrators were stocked only in male-centric

pornography stores in bad areas of town, while vibrators disguised as massagers were sold in department stores in traditionally gendered ways as devices for bored housewives. Dodson recognized this problem, and she advised her friend Dell Williams to open up a vibrator store for women. (Figure 1) It was a perfect time to start a sex-toy store, as the vibrator industry was just starting to take off. The vibrator industry had 11.9 million in sales in 1975, which increased to 12.8 million in 1978, and a 13.3 million in 1980.[1]

In this chapter, I detail the rise of the feminist sex-toy store and second-wave feminist attitudes towards sex toys. I show that feminists both enthusiastically embraced and vociferously objected to sex toys. Some women thought of vibrators as symbols of women's emancipation, while others criticized vibrators as "unnatural" technologies that were a part of the capitalist system. Some feminists designed female-friendly non-representational dildos, while others rejected the dildo outright as a symbol of the patriarchy.

Dell Williams And Eve's Garden

Invigorated by the positive response to vibrators at the NOW sexuality conference, Williams took Dodson's advice and decided to start a sex-toy store. But Williams did not know what to call her enterprise until she spotted Dodson's poster for the 1973 NOW sexuality conference. Featured on the poster was Dodson's reimagining of Leonardo DaVinci's Vitruvian Man, as a woman. "'Like Eve,' I thought, emerging with awe and fearlessness into her wonderful, unknown world, before she was shamed into that fig-leaf getup," Williams said.[2]

Like her fellow NOW members, Williams believed strongly that patriarchal Western societies had kept women from autonomy, by shaming women and demonizing their sexuality. Eve was the first clear example of this, Williams thought, as The Bible presented her as a

---

[1] Mimi Swartz, "For the Woman Who Has Almost Everything," *Esquire* (July 1980), 60-62.
[2] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 16.

temptress who led to the fall of man. She chose the name Eve's Garden for her company because she wanted to transform Eve from "a fallen, shamed woman to a strong, powerful woman proud of her strength, sensitivity, and sexuality."[3] Raised Jewish, Williams had knowledge of Western religious traditions, but never considered herself religious, just spiritual. She considered sexuality to be connected with spirituality. While she believed Western religions to be patriarchal, she did not wholeheartedly reject them. Instead, she wanted to transform them.

In September 1974, she founded the feminist sex-toy store Eve's Garden as a mail-order company with a small showroom in New York City, selling only three products "the Hitachi Magic Wand, the Prelude 3, and Betty Dodson's book, *Liberating Masturbation*."[4] Williams' range of products was purposefully small for two reasons: one, she did not have a lot of money; and, two, she only wanted to sell products that she could personally vouch for. (Figure 2)

Williams' key contribution was detangling the sex-toy business from the pornography business, creating a venue for distribution that feminists could frequent without abandoning their ideals. Refusing to sell pornography alongside vibrators allowed her to improve the status of vibrators in the women's movement. A true feminist did not watch pornography, according to Andrea Dworkin and the leaders of the women's movement, and if she needed a sexual outlet she read or watched erotica. The distinction between the two was fuzzy, of course, as neither the Supreme Court nor Women Against Pornography (WAP) were able to agree on a satisfying definition of pornography. WAP differentiated the two this way: "Erotica is about sex; pornography is about power."[5] Williams' choice to not stock porn was also a strategic branding effort. Two years after she began Eve's Garden, the feminist anti-pornography movement was in

---

[3] Ibid.,18.
[4] Ibid.,180.
[5] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 217.

full swing, although the New York branch of the anti-pornography movement was not established until 1979.[6]

Advertising Eve's Garden

Even though this was the era of porno-chic and the pornographic movie *Deep Throat* had become a big hit two years' earlier, Williams had trouble finding publications that would accept advertisements for Eve's Garden. Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* accepted large advertisements for *Deep Throat* and other pornographic movies.[7] But not all newspapers were as friendly to XXX-movies, as Stephen Vaughn says and "many newspapers would not accept advertising for them."[8] Although both Williams' ads and *Deep Throat* were centered on women receiving sexual pleasure, only the latter was widely accepted because only commercial sexual content that tapped into male sexual fantasies was tolerated.[9] Women's sexual pleasure could be discussed in popular sexual culture as long as the discussion centered on men facilitating it. Women giving themselves pleasure was more controversial. So Williams had no choice but to advertise exclusively through feminist publications, although such magazines had an ambivalent relationship towards sex toys:

> All of my customers were generated through a four-line advertisement in the classified section of *Ms. Magazine*—"Liberating vibrators and other pleasurable things for women from a feminist-owned business. Send 25 cents for our catalog. Eve's Garden, 119 W. 57th St., NYC."[10] (Figure 3)

---

[6] She also won accolades from other industries. In 1977 she won the Women's Health Coalition "Woman of the Year" award for "educating, enlightening, and serving the unfulfilled needs of women."(*New Women's Times*, vol: 3, 12, (Dec. 15, 1977 - Feb 1, 1978), 6.
[7] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 148
[8] Stephen Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)*,* 67.
[9] See Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, Chapter 5.
[10] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 179.

The mainstream newspapers that had run full-page vibrator advertisements featuring bosomy women in the early 1900s when vibrators were marketed as "innocuous" panaceas, were now shying away from all advertisements, including Williams'. The vibrator was now primarily a niche product, no longer marketed to the housewife, but to the feminist activist. And even these activists were having trouble getting their message out to other activists. Yet, the ad worked. Williams was swamped with orders, many accompanied by handwritten letters of women expressing their gratitude.[11]

By 1976, Williams had begun to take out ads in other feminist journals, including *Big Mama Rag, Off Our Backs,* and *New Women's Times.*[12] Featuring a drawing of an apple, a typical ad said: "Now is the time to declare your sexual independence or share it with a vibrator! Why not? A feminist-owned business." Williams was using Dodson's masturbation-as-liberation rhetoric to promote her mail-order vibrator business in feminist journals, while Dodson was frequently taking out ads for *Liberating Masturbation* adjacent to the Eve's Garden's ads, setting up a system where women read about the powers of masturbating with vibrators in Dodson's book and purchased them at Williams' store. Dodson even suggested buying vibrators at Eve's Garden in her book.[13] (Figure 4)

Commodifying the Women's Movement

Vibrators always possessed multiple meanings. Although the dominant meaning of the vibrator in the 1970s was as a liberatory device, the other meaning of it as a health device remained. The meanings co-existed as large manufacturers insisted they were not selling sex toys,

---

[11] These letters are available in Cornell University's Special Collections. I will review them in December 2014.

[12] Eve's Garden ad, *Big Mama Rag: a Feminist News Journal,* Vol. 4, 3 (March 1976), 10; *Big Mama Rag,* vol. 4, 12, (December 1976), 9; *Big Mama Rag,* vol. 5, 1, (January-February 1977), 7. *Chrysalis,* Issue: 2, (1977), 142. *Lesbian Tide*, vol. 6, 5, (March-April, 1977), 22.

[13] Eve's Garden Ad. *New Women's Times*, vol: 2, 11, (Dec. 15, 1976 - Jan. 15, 1977), 15.

while feminists insisted they were. Vibrators shifted meaning along with women's gender roles. In the early 1900s, vibrators were symbols of separate spheres, being marketed as home appliances, but during second-wave feminism they became emblems of another form of separation: separation from the shackles of the home.

The contradiction of a creation of corporate America being promoted as liberatory was not lost on some members of the women's movement. The mainstream feminist movement was conflicted about consumption, supporting consumerism that aligned with their political values while rejecting consumerism that did not. For example, in 1969, feminists organized protests against bridal fairs that promoted the consumption of wedding dresses and household goods among the soon-to-be-married.[14] Yet women's magazines were simultaneously also pushing a version of "consumer feminism" that "tended to equate liberation with the purchase of things—liquor, tobacco, vacations, stereos, cameras and clothes," according to Ruth Rosen.[15] While most mainstream feminists were not ipso facto opposed to consumerism, radical feminists usually were. Historian Alice Echols describes the split in early feminist groups like the New York Radical Women between politicos and feminists. The former believed that "women's oppression derived from capitalism" while the latter believed that both capitalism and the patriarchy were largely at fault. [16] However, not all radical feminists were anti-consumerism. Feminist Pat Califia parodied those feminists who thought that "feminist sex stores" was an oxymoron:

> Come to think of it, has anybody thought of launching an investigation of so-called 'feminist' businesses which sell vibrators, lubricants, dildoes, and sexually explicit material to women? Obviously these shops must be on the cutting edge of an attempt to

[14] Rosen, *World Split Open,* 204.
[15] Ibid*,* 312.
[16] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad.* 52. For example, New York Radical Women promoted a "one-dress" uniform for members of their organization that would demonstrate that their members were not consumers beholden to the fashion industry (Echols, 68).

undermine feminist sexuality. Perhaps they are all secretly funded by *Hustler* or even the CIA![17]

Although Califia and other supported her project, Williams had to contend with criticism from others in the women's movement. Her experience as an advertising executive helped her manage the delicate balance of monetizing her lofty feminist ideals without alienating a customer base of activists disillusioned with the capitalist culture. Ironically the woman who commodified feminist sexual philosophy was raised by a socialist mother and was briefly a member of the Communist Party.

Before Eve's Garden, most attempts to commodify the women's movement, aside from women's bookstores and women's coffee houses, were made by slick corporations incorporating feminist themes into their campaigns. The "best-known feminist campaign of the 1960s" was Leo Burnett's "You've Come a Long Way Baby" campaign for the cigarette Virginia Slims, says Thomas Frank in *The Conquest of Cool*. Feminist themes were simply a branding tactic to differentiate Virginia Slims cigarettes from all the other interchangeable cigarettes on the market. "This image was concocted of varying quantities of militant feminist rhetoric mixed with some less radical aspects of American femininity (like makeup and fashionable clothes)," Frank said.[18]

Like Philip Morris, Williams was also using feminist rhetoric, but with one major difference: she was sincere. As a feminist activist herself, Williams created a relationship of trust with her customers by treating them not as consumers, but as like-minded compatriots to the feminist cause. That she happened to be selling them something seemed beside the point. However, Williams did have to manage the delicate balancing act of profiting from feminist ideology without violating its tenets. One way she did so was by placing her feminist bonafides

---

[17] Pat Califia, "In Response to Dorchen Leidholdt's 'Lesbian S/M: Radicalism or Reaction," *New Women's Times* 8, no. 9, (October 1982), 15. Letter to editor signed Berkeley, Ca., *Lesbian Connection,* Vol. 1. Issue 6, (July 1975), 24.

[18] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 155-156.

at the beginning of each catalog, with a letter telling the story of Eve's Garden. "Dear Sisters" it read, an address that assumed that the sex-toy consumers were not only female, but also women's rights activists.

Eve's Garden was as much about education and empowerment as it was about selling sex toys. Her store shared the DNA of the feminist bookstores that began appearing across the country, but it was more subversive. Williams and Dodson saw themselves as subverting capitalist culture by transforming the products of it into tools that helped women break free of their role as passive actors. Williams empowered women to see consumption as political. Women's traditional role as consumer was turned on its head. Consumer culture no longer had to be repressive; it could be an expression of sexual awakening.

Unlike the branding of cigarettes as tools of liberation, the branding of vibrators as liberatory devices came from the ground up. Dodson had declared vibrators symbols of masturbatory bliss, and other feminists followed suit, while the Hitachi and Panasonic corporations ignored the feminist rhetoric and continued to pretend they were selling back massagers. Williams incorporated these themes in her catalogs, contrasting the reliable vibrator with the unreliable man:

> THE LIBERATING VIBRATORS!
>
> 'The vibrator is the best thing to come along since the wheel,' said a woman sex counselor psychologist…and, by Goddess, she may be right! It never has a cold, snores, talks back, sulks, rejects, is too tired or out of town! It's always there when you need to massage away an ache, turn yourself on, or come.[19]

For Williams the vibrator was a tool that allowed women to stop relying on men for sexual pleasure, a radical idea in line with feminist ideals that she set forth in her opening letter to customers: "All the problems of the world were created because it's been run by men *only*

[19] Eve's Garden Catalog, 1975, Sex Aids Dealers 1960-1979, Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Indiana University. Bloomington, Indiana.

and the way they kept women down was to take away *our* sexual rights." Williams did not think men should be eliminated from the sexual equation altogether, just that they should not be the only tool used.

Although positioning vibrators as liberatory tools for feminists seemed to be a perfect fit, Williams had to overcome the counterculture mindset wary of technology, the belief that natural was always better. To be sure, not all in the counterculture were opposed to technology. In fact, some championed it, including those inspired by E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* which argued that people should embrace " 'intermediate technologies,' those technical advances that stand 'halfway between traditional and modern technology,' as the solution to the dissonance between nature and technology in the modern world." Adherents to this philosophy started the Appropriate Technology (AT) movement of which Stewart Brand and his *Whole Earth Catalog* were a part. The AT movement believed that relying on small-scale technologies instead of corporate technological systems could transform society. [20]

But others in the counterculture, including those in the conservationists movement, were anti-technology and "tended to view the twentieth century as a steady decline into chaos and environmental collapse, brought on by rampant population growth and unregulated technological expansion."[21] As sex therapist and masturbation-advocate Lonnie Barbach argued in her 1975 sex-advice book *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality,* "Some women who object to the technological computer-instant-freeze-dried orientation of society may classify vibrators with frozen TV dinners, tape-recorded answering services, and microwave ovens. These women generally prefer a return to the more natural, slower, less complicated human functions. Thus,

---

[20] Andrew Kirk, "Machines of Loving Grace: Technology, Environmentalism and the Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s,* eds. Peter Braunstein and William Michael Doyle, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 362-364.
[21] Ibid., 358.

philosophically, they might be unwilling to use a vibrator."[22] While anthropologist Margaret Mead argued in a 1976 edition of *Redbook* that vibrators were an unnatural technology that dehumanized sex: "We have invented [vibrators] to substitute for what is natural. Machines alienate people from their bodies and their emotions."[23] And a respondent from Hite's survey said, "I am defensive about mentioning that I [masturbate with] something other than my hand. Among all my associates there seems to be an unspoken taboo against all such 'unnatural things.'"[24]

Williams also had to contend with the fact most sex toys were made of plastic, an "unnatural material" whose "reputation steadily declined" during the 1970s.[25] Recasting plastic sex toys as empowering devices that helped women explore their "natural" sexuality was an impressive feat, considering that plastic was used as a term meaning "falsity, or violation of nature."[26] Branding vibrators as an extension of the women's movement helped vibrators have meanings that transcended the meanings of the materials they were made of and the meanings of the corporations they were created by. Naming the store Eve's Garden and selling t-shirts with "labial flower" designs distracted from the synthetic nature of the goods being sold.

To counter these anti-technology arguments, as well as to educate her customers on how to use sex toys, Williams created pamphlets for the store that urged women to stop thinking of vibrators as "mechanical" substitutes for sexual partners and start thinking of them as devices

---

[22] Lonnie Barbach, *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 119.
[23] Clare Safran, "Plan Talk About The New Approach to Sexual Pleasure," *Redbook* (March 1976). See also, Letter to *Lesbian Connection,* vol. 5, no. 3, (Sept 1981), 14.
[24] Hite, *The Hite Report*, 83.
[25] Jeffrey Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997)*,* 242.
[26] Ibid.*,* 263.

that can either enhance sex with a partner or bring upon "sexual independence" and allow women to free themselves from "bad relationships."[27]

Women's anxiety surrounding the vibrator was related to notions of female sexuality. Once vibrators and other sex toys were sold openly as masturbation tools, they became physical embodiments of women's sexual desire. Because they provided somewhat of an answer to Freud's infamous question: "What does woman want?" they were inherently politicized artifacts. That the answer to this question was not a penis, or a sex toy molded after one, was threatening to the status quo. If men's genitalia did not give women orgasms, then men could be seen as being dispensable. So for a partnered woman to purchase a sex toy for a male or female partner was akin to taking a stand. It was not only asserting a right to sexual pleasure, but also recognizing that sexual pleasure was not contingent on a partner.

Developing a Brick-and-Mortar Store

When Eve's Garden's mail-order business took off, Williams quit her job at the ad agency and decided to open a retail store in 1979 (Figure 5). The only problem was that nobody wanted to rent to a sex store, which is surprising in a city that in the 1970s was packed with strip clubs featuring fully nude women grinding on their male patrons' laps.[28] But the sexual revolution was fairly patriarchal and full of double standards. Men were supposed to be highly sexual, so commercial establishments catering to their needs were not considered out of the ordinary.[29]

---

[27] "The Whys, Why Nots, Whens, & Wherefores of the Vibrator," in Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 260-261.
[28] Jessica Glasscock *Striptease: from Gaslight to Spotlight* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2003),161.
[29] In fact, strip clubs already had a rich history in New York in the 1970s, as they had made the city their home since the 1920s.(Glasscock, 11-12).

A pair of gay men finally rented a place to Williams on 52nd street, and she established the public face of Eve's Garden. As radical as the store was, its design hewed close to traditional gender roles. It featured a "trompe l'oeil of a garden in the store—flowers in pinks and mauves, and lush greenery" painted by Williams' brother Lorenz.[30] The use of traditionally feminine colors and symbols was ironic, as the store's ethos was to push women away from the strictures of their gender and into a new world of sexual possibility.

Williams' feminization went much further than just floral murals: she initially barred men from shopping at Eve's Garden, as she later wrote, "not out of an overriding ball-busting, man-hating, feminazi philosophy, but to create an environment where women would be free to explore their sexuality in privacy and safety."[31] However, this strategy was in violation of anti-discrimination laws and Williams was eventually forced to change it. Yet her belief that men and women's sexuality was fundamentally at odds with each other, Williams was aligned with the mainstream of the feminist movement, which thought of men's and women's sexuality as a dichotomy, with male sexuality being "violent, brutal, and alienated whereas female sexuality was gentle, interpersonally oriented, and reciprocal."[32]

Williams took out a set of new ads announcing her store. Featuring a line drawing of a naked Eve , poised like a sphinx and grasping an apple, the ad said, "Celebrate your sexuality. Proudly. Joyously. At Eve's Garden, an elegant sexuality boutique, owned and operated for women…We grow pleasurable things for your mind, body, and spirit."[33]

---

[30] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 218.
[31] Ibid.*,* 183.
[32] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,* 275.
[33] Eve's Garden Ad. *New Women's Times*, vol: 5, no. 22, (November 23 - December 6, 1979), 8.

The Dildo Debates

But women were not just purchasing sex toys from Eve's Garden, they were also influencing what types of sex toys the store carried, as well as designing the sex toys. Her customers' requests for penetrative sex toys surprised her. "In the beginning, my focus was all on the vibrator--on clitoral stimulation. I didn't have dildos because I didn't think women wanted dildos," she told *Ms.* in 1995 [34] It would have been risky for Williams to carry dildos initially because the dildo was a controversial device among lesbians, who represented half of Williams' customers. While non-penetrative vibrators symbolized liberation and a break with men, dildos did not have the same associations.

Criticisms of dildos stemmed from a philosophical divide about what a dildo actually was. Feminists who saw dildos as penis-representations disapproved of them, while those who thought of dildos as non-representational devices accepted dildos or even encouraged their use. Feminists in the former camp saw the dildo as a physical manifestation of the phallocracy or worse. Some ascribed to Andrea Dworkin's ethos that all penetration is rape, so for a feminist to penetrate herself with a dildo was nearly as bad as a woman having sex with a man.[35]

The split among pro-dildo and anti-dildo feminists was akin to the split among the pro-pornography and anti-pornography feminists. Like the anti-porn feminists, the anti-dildo feminists perceived male sexuality as violent and domineering and the dildo as a symbol of maleness and penetrative sex. Lesbians were offended by assumptions that they used dildos during sexual encounters because they saw these assumptions as confirmation of the belief that women's sexual pleasure came from penetration with a phallus. In prominent lesbian feminist

---

[34] Katie Monagle, "All About Eve's Garden," *Ms*. vol. 6, no. 3 (November 1995), 53.
[35] Heather Findlay, "Freud's 'fetishism' and the Lesbian Dildo Debates," *Feminist Studies,* vol. 18, no. 3, (Fall 1992), 564-565. Findlay was writing in the 1990s, but the terms of the debate were similar in the 1970s.

Sue Katz' article for *Lavender Vision*, "Smash Phallic Imperialism," she articulated the lesbian feminist viewpoint about dildos:

> I'm a lesbian. A lot of people can't figure out 'what we do,' how we make love without a penis around for the final consummation. A lot of boys have these ideas of dildos and bananas. Sex as an institution is so totally tied up with the penis and it's [sic] goal that boys assume there must be some poor substitute for their noble item.[36]

Pro-dildo feminists were similar to the pro-porn feminists in that they believed that women should be able to choose which sexual practices they engaged in. And like the pro-porn feminists: they "claimed that women needed more access to sexually explicit materials" and wanted women to "claim [sex] as a positive and life-affirming."[37]

The group that expressed the most hostility to dildos were the lesbian feminists. In an article in *Amazon Quarterly,* Barbara Starrett said that she disapproved of dildos because she associated them with men's misunderstanding of women's sexuality. "[Men] assume that women masturbate with phallic objects (as in The Exorcist), and that Lesbians use dildos. Like Freud, they assume that women need penetration, body domination, for sexual fulfillment."[38] Another feminist argued that only the "maladjusted" lesbians "sported dildoes," and imitating men was not the way "the modern Lesbian should present herself to the world."[39]

However, others thought that anti-dildo viewpoints, like the ones put forth by Starrett, undermined lesbian politics. An article in *The Lesbian Tide* criticized the anti-dildo movement for its forcing of women into a second closet.

> In addition to our own hang-ups, liberated lesbian society has created our own sets of taboos, based on what we perceive to be right or wrong. For example, while nothing would be said critically about a lesbian using a dildo in 1950 (had anyone had the nerve to discuss such things then!), anyone admitting to using a dildo today would probably be

---

[36] Sue Katz, "Smash Phallic Imperialism," *Lavender Vision,* vol 1, no. 1, (1970), 5.
[37] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 195-196.
[38] The phallic object in *The Exorcist* was a crucifix. Barbara Starrett, "I Dream in Female: The Metaphors of Evolution," *Amazon Quarterly,* vol. 3. No. 1, (November 1974), 15.
[39] Patricia Fullerton, "Dilemma of the Modern Lesbian," *Lavender Woman,* vol. 1, no. 3, 1972, 5.

> verbally castigated for enjoying 'phallic' pleasure. Verbal criticism has FORCED some sisters into a second closet (that is, some sisters are 'out' as lesbians, but cannot be proud of what their own brand of lesbianism entails--even to us, their sisters).[40]

The feminist movement's conflicted relationship towards dildos prevented dildos from becoming symbols of liberation. The best dildo advocates could hope for was to convince other women to overcome their philosophical objections to the penis-like device, reducing the shame involved in using dildos.

To justify their support of dildos, many pro-dildo feminists insisted that they thought of dildos as non-representational. For example, the Nomadic Sisters, authors of the lesbian sex manual *Loving Women*, advocated using dildos during masturbation and partnered sex, but explicitly defined the dildo as, "not as a penis representation, but as an object for vaginal stimulation." Reviews of *Loving Women* praised it for attempting to reduce the stigma surrounding penetration and dildoes and giving " a new sense of respectability and desirability" to artificial devices.[41]

Yet the reviews also show that this view was not without controversy. The ideological divide between the two sides ran deep, and even though the Nomadic Sisters said that dildos should be thought of as non-representational, a reviewer in *Big Mama Rag* thought that this was unrealistic because "most women" associated dildos with penises, and therefore could not make the shift to thinking of dildos non-representationally. The reviewer also proffered two other objections to the use of dildos: that they were artificial and that they were made by men.[42] The latter criticism was true. Most of the dildos in the 1970s were made by men, which explains their

---

[40] Karla Jay, "The Spirit is Feminist but the flesh is?" *The Lesbian Tide,* vol. 4. No. 3, (October, 1974), 15.
[41] Leigh and M. Duck Brody, "Two Views on Loving Women," *Lavender Woman,* vol. 4. no. 3, (June 1975), 10.
[42] R. Snake, "Loving Women" review, *Big Mama Rag,* vol. 3, no. 5, (June 1975), 13.

realistic look. [43] Williams aimed to shift the design of dildos away from realism, and she enlisted her customers to help her.

It was not just the design that bothered her; she also did not like the materials they were made of. Most of the dildos on the market in the mid 1970s were made of a fairly hard rubber or non-pliable plastic that could not be properly sanitized because of its porousness.[44] But a newly commercialized material developed by General Electric and Corning Glass in the early 1940s as a heat-resistant sealant was about to change the sex-toy industry.[45]

Silicone Dildos

The story of the silicone dildo begins with a West Indies-born engineer named Gosnell Duncan. Like many others who entered the sex-toy industry, Duncan did not have a life-long aspiration to create artificial penises. Instead, he planned on becoming a mechanical engineer. Born in 1928, Duncan left Grenada to study mechanical engineering in New Brunswick, Canada, in 1963, but made a stop in New York on his way. He never did get to Canada, and instead he ended up working as an auto mechanic in New York. One year after he arrived in New York, he landed a job working as a temporary welder for International Harvester in Chicago. In January 1965, while working the night shift at International Harvester he had an accident that changed his life. For hours the day-shift workers had been building an off-road truck. Weary from the exhausting construction, they had forgotten to place pins in the truck bed. When Duncan and his

---

[43] "Dongs: The Images of Men," Doc Johnson Marital Aids Catalog, 1977. Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Sex Aids Dealers, 1970-1979. Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

[44] "Improved Penis Reproduction," Great Western Surgical Supply Catalog, June 1969; "Neumo-Penis-Aid" Pacific Products Catalog, Norse Medical Supply Company, 1968. Understanding the Market," *The Adult Business Mail Marketing Guide*. Washington, D.C.: RPE Publications, 1979, 10. Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

[45] Herman Liebhafsky, *Silicones Under the Monogram: A Story of Industrial Research* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 237-239.

co-worker arrived at 11 p.m. neither of them noticed that the pins were missing. As Duncan lay underneath the truck, the truck bed fell. Duncan was trapped underneath, his spine crushed by the truck bed. Duncan was never able to walk again. And not only was he now confined to a wheelchair, but he was also impotent, and incontinent at 37 years of age, with a wife to please and four children to support. He switched careers from welding to mechanical and architectural drawing, but his life-changing injuries continued to occupy him.[46]

In 1971, he became active in the handicapped community. This was a time of widespread activism in the disability movement.[47] At a disability conference in Indianapolis Duncan attended an open session on sexuality. The panel posed a question to the audience, "Would you purchase a dildo to solve your sexual problems?" A bunch of hands in the audience shot up. Duncan had an epiphany. An untapped market of impotent handicapped men would jump at the chance to purchase artificial penises. Thus, a business was born.

Duncan surveyed the dildos currently on the market, and, just like Williams, he was unsatisfied with their quality. "In the 1970 and 1980s most dildos were made of heat-treated rubber and would melt with heat," Duncan said. Therefore, they could not be sanitized in between uses. They also were not exactly body safe. So he contacted a chemist at General Electric, explaining that he needed a "rubber-based product that is non-irritating to the human body" and could withstand high temperatures. [48]

---

[46] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.
[47] The disability movement was an offshoot of the larger counterculture movement, and it got its start in Berkeley, California, when high-school student Ed Roberts insisted that the University of California-Berkeley accommodate him. For Roberts' story and more on the movement see, Doris Fleischer, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 36-43 (Roberts), & Chp. 3.
[48] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.

Like other materials that have been used to create sexual devices, silicone began its life for other purposes. J. Franklin Hyde of Corning Glass developed silicone in the 1930s because Corning needed a material for electrical insulation that was malleable and could withstand the high heat put off by electrical wires. In 1940, Eugene Rochow of General Electric discovered how to produce silicones on a large scale through his patented direct process of creating methlycholorosilane. Five years later, Dr. Earl Warrick of the Dow Corning Company created silicone rubber.[49] But it was not until a half century later that an engineer recognized that silicone would be the perfect material for sex toys. Silicone rubber had a number of properties that made it suitable for use with the body. It was non-porous, easy to sanitize, and it retained heat. The development of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) by Goodrich in 1926 had led to more flexible and lifelike dildos being produced in the 1930s, but PVC had major drawbacks, including porousness, a "plastic" smell, and the inability to retain heat. By the 1960s, PVC was the main material of choice for sex toys, even though silicone rubber had existed since 1945. In the 1960s, GE was actively working on developing silicones safe enough to be used within the body, but it was not working with any sex-toy manufacturers. At the time, G.E.'s silicone was being used for adhesives, boots, and various other uses.[50]

Yet it was key that Duncan develop a silicone that was not irritating to the skin. For a year, Duncan and the G.E. chemist developed a special silicone for dildos. They sent samples back and forth until Duncan was satisfied that he had arrived upon a safe and flexible enough silicone rubber that would be suitable for dildos. Duncan hired a lawyer and attempted to get a patent, but the lawyer died, and he never ended up getting one.

---

[49] Milton Silverman, "The Scientists Goofiest Discovery," *Saturday Evening Post*, (Feb. 26, 1955), 36-37, 126-127.
[50] Meikle, *American Plastics,* 83-85.

He started a dildo company in 1972, hiring one employee and naming his company Scorpio Products. Since sex toys were still a marginally legal business, there was no roadmap on how to proceed, no trade associations to consult with. He just had some vats of silicone and his ideas. “The designs were all my mental creations,” he said. “I remember writing to the Kinsey Center, and I corresponded with them. From what I read, and using myself as the normal I was able to come up with sizes.” These sizes ranged from 6 to 9.5 inches long and one to two inches wide in girth. Armed with a handful of dildos, he went back to the disability community to sell his solution. But for the first two years, sales were low. Duncan had to find another set of customers. [51]

An ad in a late 1970s edition of *The Village Voice* gave him an idea. The ad was for a new women’s-owned sex-toy store called Eve’s Garden. Surrounded by dildos in his Brooklyn studio Duncan called the number and asked Dell Williams if she would be interested in carrying his dildos. Even though Williams had refused to carry dildos she invited Duncan to her warehouse to show them to her anyway. “Duncan brought his new silicone dildos to my shop and gave me his pitch,” Williams said. He told her that “silicone dildos were pliable, and they retained body heat and therefore felt more realistic than the old-fashioned kind, and they were easy for their users to sterilize between different sexual partners and/or different sexual acts. All you had to do was pop them in the top rack of your dishwasher for a thorough cleaning.” But that was not enough to convince Williams. She still had a fundamental problem with dildos that Duncan’s silicone stash did not solve: they looked like penises. “Why did a dildo have to look

[51] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.

like a cock at all, I asked Duncan," Williams wrote in her memoir. "Did it have to have a well-defined, blushed-pink head, and blue veins in bas-relief?" [52]

Her mail-order business was, after all, a haven for lesbians and others in the women's movement who had been fighting for their independence from men. The very presence of a realistic replica of male genitalia in the catalog could have been enough to turn away customers. "Maybe what a dildo was really all about was its shape—its ability to accommodate a woman's natural desire to be filled up," Williams thought.[53] But she was not certain. So before she agreed to stock Duncan's dildos she enlisted her manager to draft a customer survey asking her patrons: "What do you want in a dildo?" Although Duncan had emphasized getting the size right, Williams' customers said that size was not important, shape was. "Tapered," "undulated" and "pliable" dildos were what they wanted. Women also wanted "pretty colors."[54] Williams sketched out her customers' ideal dildo, which was a wave-shaped and probe-like dildo curved in the middle.[55]

Using Williams' customers' surveys, Duncan created the "Venus" dildo in "pale pink and chocolate brown."[56] The Venus dildo differed dramatically from the other dildos on the market because it lacked a penis-shaped head, and it was pliable so it could conform to a variety of women's bodies. Williams' customers were satisfied that they did not have to abandon their feminist ideals in the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

For the first time, consumers had a direct hand in shaping the design of sex toys, designs that were influenced by both practical and political concerns. Williams' reliance on her

---

[52] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden*, 192.
[53] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.
[54] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 193.
[55] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.
[56] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,*193.

customers' input was an approach similar to that of the Boston Women's Health Collective who had crafted *Our Bodies Ourselves* by soliciting reader responses to early editions to the book. Wendy Kline argues that readers played a large part in the BWHC's revisions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and that "exchanges between the collective's authors and readers reveal how knowledge of women's bodies and health was reconstructed from a diversity of personal perspectives beginning in the 1970s."[57]

Like all tools, sex toys are imbued with meaning that reflects the society they are created in. The vibrator of the early 20th century was a product of a society full of contradictions about sex, where women's sexual pleasure was both viewed as essential to a good marriage and a sign of moral decay in single women. In the 1970s, the dildo was a product of a society of women who were seeking freedom from perceived male sexual domination, women who were taking control of their bodies, women had just received the right to an abortion and the right to be prescribed birth control if they were unmarried. Designing non-representational dildos in traditionally feminine colors allowed women to literally and symbolically corral male sexual power. A feminized dildo made a statement that the natural penis was unsatisfying, that women could easily co-opt the last bastion of maleness.

Before this time, consumers had to either subvert the stated use of technologies—for example, by massaging their clitorises with their vibrating back massagers—or resort to using male-designed sex toys, which were either direct facsimiles of penises, or designed to vibrate the vagina internally. Duncan and Williams' sex-toy collaboration finally allowed consumers to have a say in the design of the devices they were inserting in their bodies.

---

[57] Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge,* 40.

Williams and Her Customers

Since Williams' believed that "human sexuality is a divine gift" her relationship with her customers was similar to that of an evangelist with his flock. Although Williams was not affiliated with a particular religion, she received letters treating her as a prophet: "I was in the…ministry for many years. What you do is a ministry also, and you do it very well," said one letter writer.[58]

But getting the word out about silicone sex toys and the other curated sex products at Eve's Garden required creative marketing. While other mail-order sex-toy companies bundled their vibrators in catalogs replete with pornography, Williams took another route.

> I went to sex educators and therapists with my catalogs to try to tell them about Eve's Garden so they could talk to their patients and help them solve some of their sexual problems, and they had my catalog to use as something they could pass on to their customers, their patients, who had sexual problems. My basic market was the sex educators, therapists, and counselors.[59]

In a way, Williams was shifting the sex-toy market back to the medical establishment, which was where vibrator technology had been birthed back in the early 20th century. However, physicians were not promoting vibrators to their patients as nonsexual panaceas. They were promoting vibrators for a single, unabashedly sexual use: as a means to procure the female orgasm.

Although Williams was full of verve, she did not have the business sense to make large profits from Eve's Garden. So in the early 1980s she partnered with an investor who suggested she close down the storefront and return to her mail-order roots. He shifted the warehouse to Boston where the rent was cheaper. And he expanded her inventory to include a "full line of sexy lingerie…satin teddies and garter belts and string bikinis by Bob Mackie" and feathered masks.

---

[58] Later in life she became an ordained interfaith minister (Williams, 238). Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 182.
[59] Interview with Dell Williams, November 22, 2013.

But her customers did not buy. Up until this point, Williams and her customers had dictated the inventory she carried. What her customers wanted were sex toys. Williams had founded Eve's Garden to give women a space to purchase vibrators and other masturbatory tools, a space that had not previously existed. Lingerie was available everywhere. Williams shifted her role to that of head of advertising and public relations in 1981. Within a year she sensed that something was not right. She visited the warehouse in Boston and found boxes of unsold lingerie and masks, along with un-mailed catalogs. So with the $600 left in Eve's Garden's bank account, she took the business "back to basics," stocking her mail-order catalog and re-opened store with "quality sex toys and the instructional books to go with them."[60]

Good Vibrations

By 1981, Williams was not alone in the feminist sex-toy business. Sex educator Joani Blank had opened Good Vibrations in San Francisco in 1977, inspired by Eve's Garden. Born in 1937 in a Boston suburb, Blank was trained as a public health educator, receiving two masters in the field, one from the University of Hawaii in 1962 and another from the University of North Carolina in 1965. Blank bounced around the country working as public health educator in Michigan, New Hampshire, and West Virginia, before moving to San Francisco in 1971. By the time she moved to San Francisco, the sexual revolution was well underway, and Blank began working at Planned Parenthood.[61] One of the first women she met in the city was Maggi Rubenstein, a professor, sex therapist, and bisexual activist who urged her to join the new consciousness raising group she had started. At the time Rubinstein was working as a nurse and medical school instructor at University of California-San Francisco (UCSF), but within the next five years Rubenstein transformed the Bay Area into a sex-positive mecca, co-founding three

[60] Williams, *Revolution in the Garden,* 220.
[61] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.

seminal groups in rapid succession: San Francisco's Sex Information Hotline (SFSIH) (1973), The San Francisco Bisexual Center (1976), and the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (1976). [62] Her influence on Blank was profound, as she inspired Blank to begin her sexual advocacy, installing Blank as one of the first volunteers at SFSIH, where she dispensed sexual advice to local callers.

After working at the SFSIH, Blank was inspired to become a sex therapist. She began working with Dr. Lonnie Barbach at UCSF, who was a co-director of the Human Sexuality Program. Barbach had created a series of sex workshops for inorgasmic women, and she went on to publish a successful book based on her workshops in 1975. [63] These workshops were philosophically similar to Dodson's, but less voyeuristic and more grounded in medical theory. The clinical setting, in a medical school, and the emphasis on inorgasmia and not politics or self actualization distinguished these groups from Dodson's. But the main difference was that participants did not masturbate in front of each other, they just discussed masturbation, even though much of the course was about training women to masturbate.

Blank began co-teaching the 10-week courses with Barbach and that is how her idea for opening a sex-toy store evolved. The course began with six women and two counselors sitting around in a circle, telling their sex histories one by one. Each week they would have homework, beginning with the examination and touching of their genitals in the first few weeks, and by the fifth week the homework was masturbation. They would discuss their masturbation experiences

---

[62] Elizabeth Sullivan, "Godmother of Sex Ed: Maggi Rubenstein," FoundSF ,accessed on June 10, 2014, http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=Godmother_of_SexEd:_Maggi_Rubenstein

[63] Barbach, *For Yourself* ; "About Lonni Barbach," accessed April 5, 2014, http://www.lonniebarbach.com/

at the next session: whether or not they had orgasms, and what their orgasms had felt like. Based on the women's experiences, the counselors would give advice on how they should continue.[64]

For women who struggled with having orgasms, vibrators were not the first recourse. "Now we didn't start out with vibrators for very good reason. We did not want people to use the vibrator as a way to avoid touching themselves. We wanted them to practice with their hands first," Blank said. Only if other methods did not work did Barbach and Blank recommend vibrators. Although they did not recommend vibrators as a first step, Barbach and Blank were both strong advocates of vibrators. Barbach overcame women's objections to vibrators by equating them to the innocuous technology of the bicycle: "A vibrator may be equivalent to using training wheels to learn to ride a bicycle. You get the feeling of what the experience is like and then, if you want to, you can practice without the machine. However, there is no reason to stop using a vibrator, either alone or with a partner if you enjoy it."[65]

Vibrators were new technology to most of the participants. "Very few of them had tried any sex toys. If they had, they had tried, perhaps a dildo. They were trying to simulate intercourse and they weren't touching their clitorises necessarily. So needless to say, they weren't coming," according to Blank. And the course worked, "Virtually everybody who went through the groups starting having orgasms," Blank said. In fact, they stopped calling the participants inorgasmic, and started calling them "preorgasmic." [66]

These women wanted to know where to buy vibrators, and Barbach and Blank just did not have a good answer. Blank had heard about a feminist sex-toy store in New York called Eve's Garden, but San Francisco did not have anything like that. So she asked her friend and

---

[64] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.
[65] Lonnie Barbach, *For Yourself,* 107.
[66] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.

fellow therapist Toni Ayers to start a vibrator store. Ayers declined and encouraged Blank to start a store instead.

Blank ignored the advice until she got laid off from the program at UCSF in 1976 , when they restructured their program and required all their counselors to have PhDs. With the vibrator-store idea in the back of her head, she flew out to New York City to visit Williams. At the time Williams' store was mainly mail order although she had "a small showroom."[67]

Blank flew back to San Francisco inspired by Eve's Garden. But before she opened the store, she self-published a book in 1976 titled *Good Vibrations: The Complete Guide to Vibrators*, which outlined the philosophy that informed her store of the same name. In her book she attempted to reduce the stigma surrounding vibrators, dispelling myths surrounding vibrator addiction and relaying her friends' feelings of shame when trying to buy vibrators. Taking a cue from Dodson, Blank argued that women should masturbate frequently to learn about their bodies. They could either transmit their knowledge of their own bodies to their lovers or enjoy masturbation for its own sake. She suggested using vibrators during penetrative intercourse and masturbating in front of male partners with vibrators. This willingness to engage men in women's sexual exploration led Blank to allow men in her store from the beginning, unlike Williams who barred men from entering until forced to by law. Blank's willingness to invite men into her store put her at odds with many of the San Francisco feminists, who encouraged separatism from men.[68]

---

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

Or, at least that's how Blank tells the story of her founding of Good Vibrations.[69] Williams has a different take. "When I first opened Eve's Garden in the 70s, [Blank] visited me in New York, and she saw our little operation. And I asked her if she would be willing to start Eve's Garden on the coast. She said, no, she didn't want to do that. But a year later she opened her own place with the same purpose as mine, to educate, etc."[70]

Blank also differentiated her store from Eve's Garden in a variety of other ways. She choose to create a welcoming storefront that served the San Francisco community instead of a national mail-order vibrator business. But first, like Williams, she had to struggle to find an appropriate space because even in San Francisco not everybody wanted to rent space to a sex-toy store, no matter how educational it was. Her first choice of a location was in the Noe Valley, a location in central San Francisco full of hip boutiques. Blank found a good space but was turned down because the landlord did not approve of her business. With $4,000 in capital, Blank opened up her store in the edgy Mission District in San Francisco in March 1977, an area replete with punk clubs. The tiny, 200-square-foot space she rented gave the store a sense of intimacy that larger commercial sex-toy stores like Doc Johnson did not have. Initially, she carried 18 items, and filled up the rest of the space with her antique vibrator collection.[71]

In this tiny space, Blank and her husband set out to create a new vision of a sex-toy store in opposition to the seedy stores that were creepy and full of pornographic magazines. (Figure 6) Blank was facing an uphill battle, as the very term "feminist adult store" would have been considered an oxymoron among a large swath of San Francisco feminists, as two months after Good Vibrations opened, members of the group Women Against Violence and Pornography

---

[69] Ibid.; Joani Blank, *Good Vibrations: The New Complete Guide to Vibrators* (San Francisco: Down There Press, 2000), VII.
[70] Interview with Dell Williams, November 22, 2013.
[71] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.

(WAVPM) engaged in a "'May Day Stroll' through the city's North Beach district of massage parlors, go-go bars, adult bookstores, and XXX cinemas."[72]

Instead of ignoring the men's domain of adult bookstores, she nodded to it in her design, painting the store chocolate brown in homage to the plain brown bags that sex toys were usually sold in, installing a "plain brown cabinet" to top off the look. A home bar served as a sales counter and a display cabinet rounded out the space, which melded the do-it-yourself hippie ethos with an aura of sex education. [73]

The centerpiece of her store was the display case featuring four different plug-in vibrators. The plug-in vibrator was already a feminist symbol thanks to Dodson and Williams, and its central location in the store alerted customers to the ethos of the store. Placing non-phallic vibrators front and center made a statement that the store was about women's pleasure, not men's idea of how women should experience pleasure. Among the vibrators were the Hitachi Magic Wand, a Wahl vibrator and a square-headed General Electric model. All had been sold as non-sexual massagers by the corporations that produced them. Most of these vibrators were available in department stores, but by simply putting them in a different space, Blank, like Williams and Dodson, redefined the technology. [74]

On the opposite wall she showed off her antique vibrator collection, which consisted of about a dozen vibrators she had collected over the years. In addition to the plug-in vibrators she sold a handful of eight-inch battery-operated "representational vibrators," a tiny vibrator a few inches long, and an egg-shaped one. These vibrators were not placed in such a prominent

---

[72] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography,*141.
[73] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.
[74] Ibid.

position, owing to their cheapness, low-power, and, in the case of the penis-shaped ones, phallic shape.

Blank hid her dildos in her "plain brown cabinet" because she "didn't want to scare away" customers who did not like dildos. But sexual pleasure is not driven by ideology and the fact remained that many women enjoyed stimulating themselves with dildos. So Blank had to serve these customers without alienating the customers who found dildos both ideologically and sexually unappealing. Her solution was to squirrel away her dildos like contraband and to show them only to customers brave enough to ask for them. Even among those customers most could not usually bring themselves to utter the dreaded word "dildo." "They would walk up to the counter and they would say, "Do you have anything else?" Blank said. She knew what they meant, but she did not always give them a straight answer.

> If it was a man who was asking, I always said, "Sorry, no." And if it was a woman who was asking, I would say, "Are you inquiring about dildos?" And if they said yes, I would go into my plain brown cabinet and pull out two or three dildos that we carried.[75]

Blank's best seller was the Hitachi Magic Wand, a device that Good Vibrations featured in their advertisements a few years' later.[76] Blank also designed her own sex toy, "Joni's Butterfly," a butterfly-shaped clitoral stimulator that strapped to a woman's body and could be worn during penetrative intercourse with a partner. Choosing to outsource the production of the Butterfly to Hong Kong was a mistake, however, because she was unable to control the quality. This was Blank's first and last foray into sex toy design.[77]

In the mid-1980s, Good Vibrations began producing a catalog, and that is when they became direct competitors to Eve's Garden because they were now both serving a national feminist clientele. Even Williams' dildo-maker Gosnell Duncan began to supply Good

---

[75] Interview with Joani Blank, April 1, 2014.
[76] Blank, *Good Vibrations* (2000), 12.
[77] Ibid., 22.

Vibrations in 1983, working with store-employee and sexologist Susie Bright to design dildos.[78] In their inaugural publication of *Good Vibes Gazette,* a newsletter about the business, they heralded his dildos. "Yes, we have silicon [sic] dildos," trumpeted the headline. The article went on to champion silicone's superiority as a material, as well as preempt customers' inquiries about whether or not the dildos had a phallic shape:

> For two years we have been fortunate to carry a distinctive line of sex toys that have changed the whole way we think about dildos. Before Scorpio Products came along, dildos came in two sizes: huge and ridiculously huge. They were not well made, were ugly and impossible to clean. Then along came Scorpio with a dildo line that includes a wide range of sizes and colors in styles that are tuned to our customers' desires. Scorpio makes dildos that have a 'neutral' plaything look, as well as those that resemble penises.[79]

Like Williams, Blank had chosen to transform her feminist activism into a business venture. Sales were slow at first, daily gross sales of $40-$100 were the norm.[80] By the end of her first year she had sold $15,000 worth of sex toys and books.[81] Five years' later, Good Vibrations' sales had increased, but the mail-order business was still losing money.

Advertising Good Vibrations

But for Blank, sales were always secondary. She was a bundle of contradictions: an anti-capitalist with a business, a saleswoman who was philosophically opposed to advertising. In this sense, she was Williams' opposite. Williams was a former ad agency executive who wholeheartedly believed in marketing, and she used her skills to promote her business, while Blank adhered to a philosophy called "marketing without advertising," a philosophy co-opted

---

[78] Interview with Gosnell Duncan, August 2, 2013.
[79] "Yes, we have silicon dildos," Good Vibes Gazette (c. 1985), 3. Sex Aids Dealers, United States, 20th Century 1980-1999, Good Vibes Gazette, Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Bloomington, IN.
[80] Rona Maerch, "Profile Joani Blank: A Sexual Aide: Revolutionary Store Good Vibrations Brought Sex Toys to the Masses," *San Francisco Chronicle,* February 14, 2003.
[81] Laqueur, *Solitary Sex,* 78.

from her association with the Briarpatch Group, a business group founded in 1974 to promote ethical businesses whose goal was not to simply make a profit but to serve the community. Inspired by Stewart Brand of The Whole Earth Catalog fame, this group believed that businesses should eschew traditional advertising and keep open books.[82] Hard-sell advertising techniques were frowned upon among the Group in favor of more "organic" advertising that fit with the 1970's anti-capitalist ethos. If the marketing did not cost anything, it was considered to be acceptable. So instead of hucksterism, businesses used a soft sell.

Instead of placing ads that enticed customers with sales gimmicks and discounts, Good Vibrations simply put ads that gave the most basic information: store hours and location. Blank described Good Vibrations' approach this way: "You'd have parties…You'd let all the progressive organizations in town know what you were doing. You run seminars…If you do things the right way, people will tell people about that." According to Lynn Comella, Good Vibrations created a " 'model' of sex retailing—a 'tasteful,' educationally based and quasi-therapeutic approach to selling sex toys… a retail-based model of sexual education and social activism that they see as both a commercial enterprise and a political project."[83]

The marketing-without-advertising philosophy was hardly revolutionary. It was merely the counterculture's version of public relations, but it did represent a crucial break with traditional public relations in its sincerity. Instead of treating customers as if they were rubes, this philosophy treated customers as members of a cohort of progressively minded citizens. It transformed consumption into activism, and made purchasing overtly political. One of the advantages of this philosophy was that it cost nothing. As Blank said, "You must remember, I

---

[82] Michael Phillips, "What Small Business Experience Teaches Us About Economic Theory," in Paul Elkins, *The Living Economy*, Taylor and Francis, 1986, 274-275.
[83] Lynn Comella, "Selling Sexual Liberation: Women-Owned Sex-Toy Stores and Business of Sexual Change," (dissertation, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2004), 17.

was running this business on a shoestring. So buying advertising? You've got to be crazy." Until the mid-1980s, Good Vibrations only advertised locally, by placing ads in the weekly alternative newspapers *East Bay Express* and *The San Francisco Weekly.* Blank could have probably advertised in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Examiner*, as they both had a more liberal view towards sex ads than other newspapers. It was one of the few big-city newspapers that still allowed pornographic movie advertisements in its pages, but she chose not to.[84] But Good Vibrations' advertising budget was less than a third of the amount they were spending on catalog production.[85] Instead of spending money on advertising, Blank solicited her customers to send her lists of the names of their friends who would not be "in the least offended to receive an explicit, honest and comprehensive sex toy catalog" in exchange for a $10 discount.[86]

Blank's advertising philosophy was partly driven out of necessity, as she had difficulty getting feminist publications to run her ads, which demonstrates the split in the women's movement between pro-sex-toy and anti-sex-toy feminists, a rift complicated by the numerous philosophical differences about technology, gender identity, masturbation, and the public perception of the women's movement. Blank's problems began in March 1982, when she contacted *Ms.* magazine, asking them to run a classified ad for Good Vibrations in their June 1982 issue that read: "Good vibrations: vibrator store and museum: sex toys and books about sex. Friendly feminist and fun." *Ms.* was a natural fit for a Good Vibrations ad, as they had been printing ads for Eve's Garden since 1974. Yet instead of accepting the ad, the magazine sent

---

[84] *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* banned pornographic movie ads in 1977. For a discussion of porn movie ads in mainstream newspapers see Bronstein, 148-153.
[85] "How're We Doin'," Good Vibes Gazette, 2. Sex Aids Dealers, United States, 20th Century 1980-1999, Good Vibes Gazette, Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Bloomington, IN.
[86] Ibid., 2.

Blank a letter saying that "they already had too many ads for sex aids in the classified section." Blank was undeterred, and she eventually convinced the staff to run the ad in June.

Pleased with the ad, she sent *Ms.* a check to pay for ads in the next two months' issues. In return she received a letter from a classified advertising staff person saying, " 'The Advertising Acceptance Committee' ha[s] cancelled all vibrator ads from the pages of *Ms.*" The letter also helpfully suggested that she "advertise another product." [87] Having successfully talked her way into getting *Ms.* to run her ad before, Blank refused to take no for an answer. She begged them to take her ad, even enlisting her famous feminist friends to campaign on her behalf to no avail. Even more infuriating to Blank was the fact that they turned her down yet they were publishing a major article about Betty Dodson. When she learned about the forthcoming publication of the Dodson article, she called up the magazine to ask why they would publish an article promoting masturbation, but refuse to run ads for a vibrator store, and she was told that "the advertising department and the editorial department have nothing to do with each other." The *Ms.* staffer finally declared with self-righteousness: "We are not a sex magazine." But Blank did not back down. She said, "You know about Good Vibrations, here's our catalog. You write the ad that has acceptable words to you." *Ms.* refused to write the ad, so Blank " submitted… the most bland words I could possibly think of." Even this tactic did not work. *Ms.* responded by saying, "You can't use your name because it says 'vibrations' in it." Exasperated Blank said, "Well, what am I supposed to do, you know?"

To be sure, *Ms.* magazine had reason to be concerned. In 1978, a school-board member in New Hampshire removed *Ms.* magazine from the local Nashua, NH, high school "largely [because] it contained advertisements for 'vibrators,' contraceptives, materials dealing with

[87] Joani Blank, "Bad Vibes," Letter to the Editor, *WomaNews*, March 1983, 2.

lesbianism and witchcraft, and gay material."[88] The school board member's equating of vibrator ads with witchcraft shows just how far the vibrator had fallen in American culture. Fully illustrated ads featuring young women using vibrators regularly graced the *New York Times* from the 1900s to the 1930s, but by the 1970s only a few ads for the Hitachi Magic Wand could be seen, and none of these ads showed consumers using them. Although a student initiated a class-action lawsuit and won to get the magazine reinstated on the library's shelves, the belief that vibrator ads gave *Ms.* less credibility remained.[89]

With little hope left, Blank continued to fight for her ad. But she had nearly exhausted all her resources. Her argument that her ads were just as valid as Dodson's article on masturbation did not work. Her famous friends had not succeeding in convincing *Ms.* magazine. Nor did her agreement to sanitize the ad. If the very name of her company was offensive, a name co-opted from a family-friendly Beach Boys song, then she was left with few options. Her final chance occurred in early 1983 at a booksellers' meeting. As a publisher and author, she attended these meetings regularly. It just so happened that Gloria Steinem, co-founder of *Ms.*, was promoting her autobiography at this meeting. Blank patiently took her place in line among Steinem's acolytes who were waiting for autographs. She asked for Steinem's autograph, then introduced herself. Blank told her the story, explained that all she wanted was to pay for a tiny ad for her feminist vibrator store in the classified ad of the leading national feminist magazine. Steinem replied curtly, "Oh yeah, I heard about that." Blank gave up and never tried to advertised in *Ms.* again.

---

[88] "Ms. Magazine Wins Victory For All Women's Press in Library Case," ed. Donna Allen, *Media Report to Women,* vol. 7 (July 1, 1979), 1-2.
[89] Rhonda Salvail, et. al. v. Nashua Board of Education, 469 F. Supp. 1269 (D. New. Hamp., 1979).

Why *Ms.* would not accept the ad shows the precarious position that the vibrator occupied in the feminist movement in the 1980s. Steinem and others continued to view the promotion of masturbation as a frivolous distraction from the main goals of the feminist movement. Although vibrators symbolized liberation for Dodson, Williams, and Blank, they did not have the same meanings for Steinem.

Conclusion

In the 1970s for the first time in their history, vibrators and dildos were openly sold as sex toys. This should have been a triumphant moment for sex-toy consumers and producers. And in some ways it ways. Women who lived in San Francisco and New York could go to well-lighted stores to buy vibrators imbued with feminist values. The rest of the country could place orders from the feminist-owned stores on the coast, correspond with the owners, share their stories, and help design the next generation of dildos. Vibrators became symbols of feminist liberation. Dildos became safer and more feminine.

But the celebration of sex toys among some radical feminists caused sex toys to be marginalized. Ads for vibrators slowly disappeared from mainstream newspapers. Even cultural feminist publications stopped accepting ads for vibrators in the early 1980s. The corporations that produced the vibrators that feminists prized pretended that their vibrators were not sex toys. The dildo was debated endlessly. Could a woman be a good lesbian and use a dildo? Or was she capitulating to the patriarchy? What if the dildo looked like a seahorse? Was that OK? Debates about sex toys played out in various media outlets, and in fictional portrayals in films and TV shows. These are the subject of my next chapter.

Betty Dodson and me, Eve's Garden party, 1977. (Photo: Bettye Lane)

Figure 1: Image of Dodson and Williams kissing.
Source: Dell Williams and Lynn Vannucci, *Revolution in the Garden: Memoirs of the Gardenkeeper.* Silver Back Books, 2010.

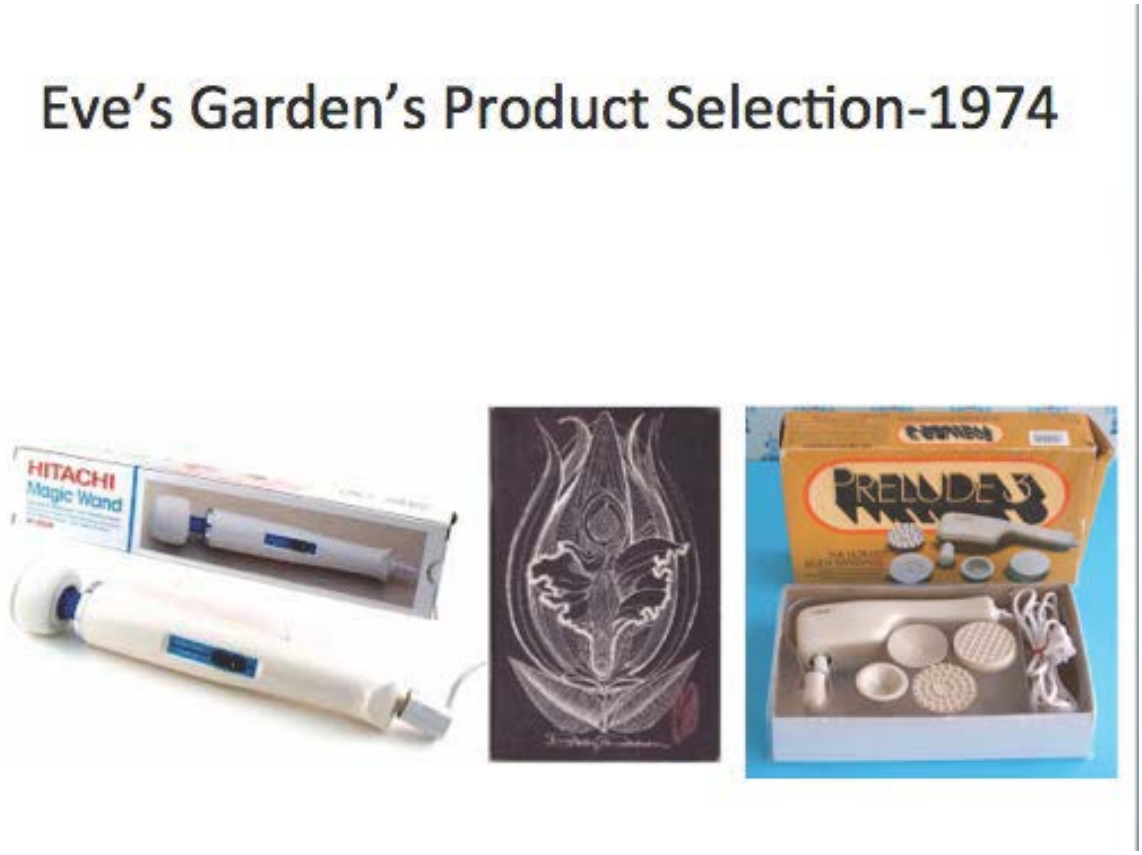


Figure 2: The three items that Eve's Garden carried: Hitachi Magic Wand (left), Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation* (center), the Prelude 3 vibrator (right)

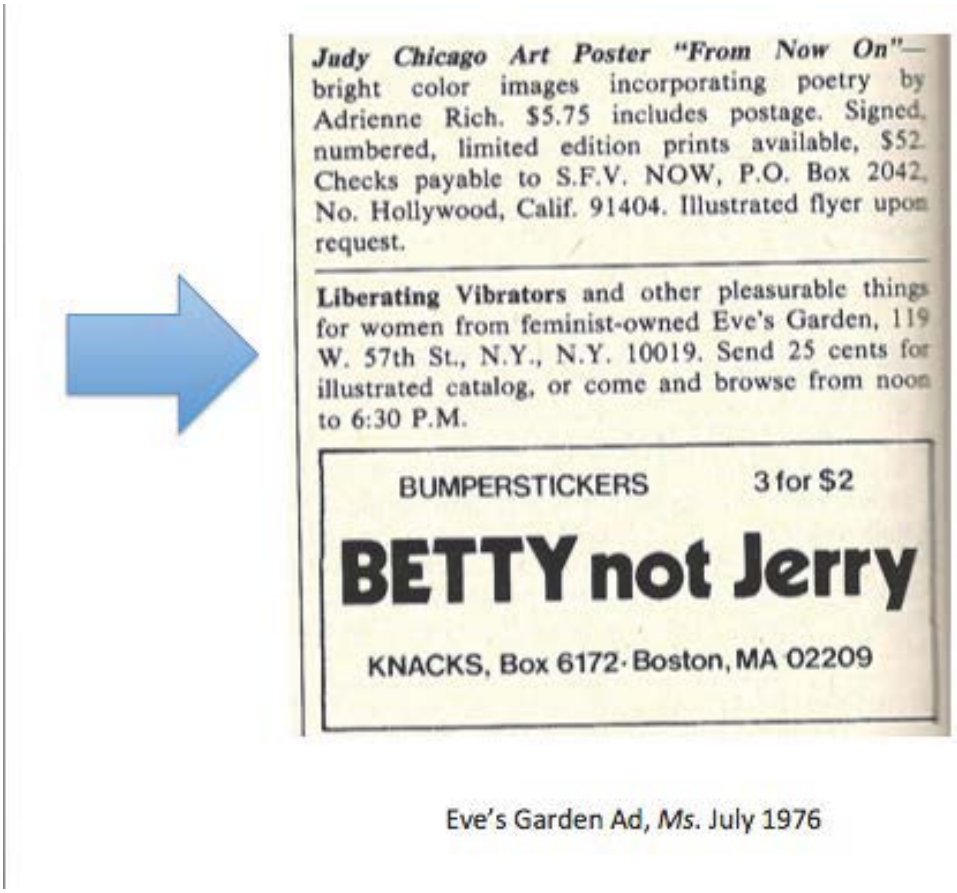


Figure 3: Eve's Garden ad in *Ms.* magazine, nearly identical to the one Williams ran 2 years' earlier.
Source: *Ms.* magazine, July 1976

Figure 4: Eve's Garden ad from *New Women's Times*, vol: 2, 11, (Dec. 15, 1976 - Jan. 15, 1977), 15.

An Eve's Garden PR photo, 1979.

Figure 5: A picture of Williams displaying Eve's Garden's goods at her store in 1979. Source: Dell Williams and Lynn Vannucci, *Revolution in the Garden: Memoirs of the Gardenkeeper.* Silver Back Books, 2010.

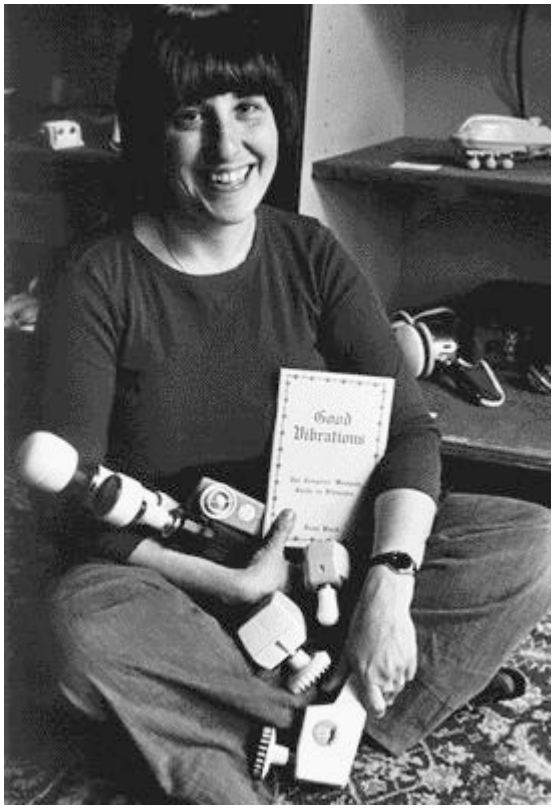
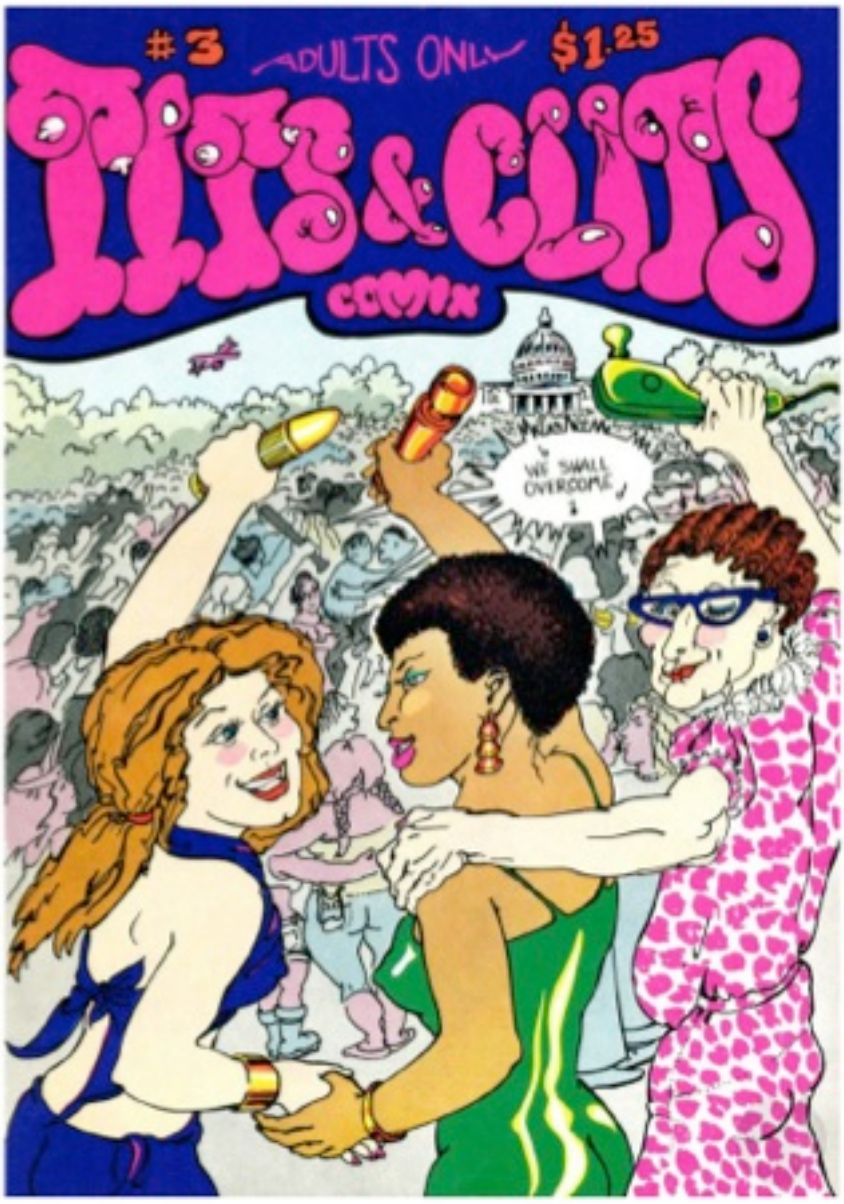


Figure 6: Joani Blank in Good Vibrations 1980, holding a copy of her book, *Good Vibrations.*
Source: http://www.joaniblank.com/family_album/album3.htm

Chapter 8: Sex Toys Head to Popular Culture



The 1970s represented both an advance and a retreat for sex toys in American culture. Although sex toys were openly sold, they still were usually discussed in hushed tones. In part this was because masturbation was the ugly step-child of the sexual revolution. It was usually left out of stories about the sexual revolution in the mainstream media, in favor of stories about “free

love," stories that invoked a hedonic land of pill-popping sexually available nubile young women in flowing skirts, not masturbating young women sequestered in their bedrooms with cumbersome machines riveted to their crotches. Sex toys were "unnatural" and did not fit into the ethos of the media-created image of counterculture pioneers who promoted free-flowing sexuality as an extension of environmentalism. So it is not surprising that when sex toys were mentioned in the mainstream press, it was usually to criticize them as part of a capitalistic enterprise, as one *New York Times* reporter wrote in 1977. "Sexual liberation became big business [in the 1960s and 1970s]. The 'how-to' book, the 'stroke' book, the survey and the vibrator are a direct result of the sexual revolution."[1]

Because journalists widely ignored sex toys in the 1960s and 1970s, historians have underplayed their importance. Yet many men and women probably experienced the sexual revolution through sex toys. Most of these experiences are lost to history. But there are other ways of examining the role of sex toys during this era. For nearly the first time in history, sex toys showed up in American culture in non-disguised forms. In this chapter, I will examine cultural representations of vibrators and other sex toys in underground and popular culture from the 1960s to the 21st century. For the most part, sex toys did not appear in popular and underground culture until the 1970s.[2] Artistic representations of artifacts can illuminate attitudes towards them and can lead to a greater understanding of the object's place in American culture. Sex toys were primarily confined to the fringes of culture in the 1960s and 1970s, which shows that the devices were still stigmatized by the mainstream. Sex toys popped up in underground films, comics, and zines, but rarely in mainstream media.

---

[1] Rosalyn Drexler. "The Style of the 70's." *New York Times,* Jun 05, 1977, BR6.
[2] Sex toys appeared in sex comics of the 1930s-1950s (aka Tijuana Bibles), but they were never adopted as a symbol of political liberation by the underground press, as they were in the 1970s.

It was not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries that sex toys showed up in considerably more mainstream films and TV shows. Yet this increase in representations should not be mistaken for widespread acceptance. Although undisguised sex toys were more visible in popular culture, they were not celebrated or discussed casually, but usually de-eroticized and used as plot devices to illustrate the family and religious community's inability to control sexuality. Most of these scenes appeared in comedies, demonstrating the unease surrounding sex toys.

Vibrator Use in the 1970s

Although sex toys appeared in American culture in the 1970s, data on actual sex-toy use is unclear because although many fretted about women's sex-toy use, few actually asked women whether or not they were using sex toys. Even Alfred Kinsey did not ask direct questions about sex toys. He simply inquired about women's masturbation techniques, and he found that 20% masturbated while inserting something in their vagina and 11% used "other techniques," some of which included vibrators.[3] However, two less scientific sex surveys did include questions about sex toys: the Hite Report and a *Redbook* sex survey.

The Hite Report was created by Shere Hite, a graduate student in social history at Columbia University who had become frustrated with the types of questions that men were asking in sex surveys, questions that assumed that intercourse within monogamous marriage brought women sexual pleasure. So in 1972 she administered her own surveys. Like Dodson and Williams, Hite was also an affiliate with NOW's New York City chapter when she began mailing out her surveys through various NOW chapters "abortion rights groups, university women's centers, and women's newsletters." She then took out ads in a variety of women's

[3] Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia and London: W.B. Saunders and Company, 1953), 163, 189.

magazines, from the political (*Ms.*) to the traditional (*Brides*) to solicit more survey responses.[4] Hite's surveys have major methodological problems, from a respondent group that skewed to childless career women to loaded questions.[5] Since Hite's interviewees were mostly feminists and women's rights activists, these results can only tell us what women within these movements thought of vibrators.

Although Hite's surveys were not representative of the population as a whole, they still can provide insights into how often a subset of women masturbated and what devices they masturbated with. Hite found that a majority of women masturbated (82%), and many of them used vibrators (she did not quantify how many in the survey).[6] A few women reported saying that they used vibrators to speed up orgasms during masturbation. Others reported that they had their first orgasms ever while using a vibrator.[7]

The other major survey during the 1970s that asked questions about vibrator use was the *Redbook* survey. In 1976, *Redbook* magazine surveyed 100,000 women about their sexual practices and found that about 20% of women used sex devices during "lovemaking," with half of those women using vibrators.[8] This survey established that a substantial number of women used sex toys, but did not detail whether women used vibrators during masturbation.[9]

Although the number of women using vibrators during masturbation and sexual intercourse was unclear, what is certain is that vibrators were being openly marketed more

---

[4] Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality (*New York: Seven Stories Press, 1981), 17, 25.
[5] Julia A. Ericksen, *Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 145-149.
[6] Hite, *The Hite Report*, 452.
[7] See also, Ibid., 55, 58, 76,78,81,82, 177.
[8] Clare Safran, "Plan Talk About The New Approach to Sexual Pleasure," *Redbook* (March 1976), 86.
[9] *Redbook* may have collected this data, but if they did collect it they did not publish the information in their magazine.

frequently. A March 1976 *Redbook* article about vibrators summed up the changing attitudes this way:

> Until very recently the subject—the use of vibrators for self-stimulation—has been considered unworthy of serious consideration. But in the past few years, on the basis of knowledge gained from studies of human sexual response, some of the country's most reputable sex therapists have reconsidered the matter and come to new conclusions…Because vibrators are being marketed on a nationwide basis, we believe it is our responsibility, as editors of a magazine for women, to present appropriate and objective reporting on the subject so readers can form their own intelligent opinions.[10]

Redbook was acknowledging a trend toward wider acceptance of vibrators that had come, in part, from the promotion of vibrators in sex manuals. In fact, the most popular sex manual in the 1970s, *The Joy of Sex* (1972), advocated the use of vibrators and dildos. Written by the British doctor Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* found its way into millions of bedroom drawers. It was considered the "bible" of sex, so its advice is indicative of cultural attitudes towards sex toys. Comfort advised women to use vibrators during masturbation because "[vibrators] can produce some sexual feeling in almost any woman." Vibrators, he went on to say, are "a new standby, which have proved very useful in teaching sexually inexperienced women to stimulate their own responses." He did, however, reassure his readers by saying that "vibrators are no substitute for a penis." Comfort was not just a champion of vibrators. Although he discussed dildoes in less detail, he was positive about them. "The sight of a woman using one is clearly a turn-on for some males," he wrote. Although *Redbook* and *The Joy of Sex* openly discussed sex toys, it was in underground comics where some of the most extensive sex-toy conversations were taking place.[11]

---

[10] Safran, "Sexual Pleasure," 85.
[11] Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Love Making* (New York: Simon and Schuster Fireside Books, 1972), 176. 220, 239.

The Sex Toy in Underground Comics

A variety of attitudes towards sex toys, from the celebratory to the contentious, pervaded the raft of underground comics that began appearing in the 1970s. Distributed in head shops alongside bongs and other marijuana paraphernalia, these comics (known as "comix") depicted everything the mainstream comics did not, including incest, drugs, and a militarized Jesus. They were also expensive, costing 50 cents, four times as much as DC comics.[12]

Underground comix were anathema to the mainstream. As historian James Danky says, "Existing periodical distributors would have nothing to do with underground comix publishers, not only because much of the product was deemed pornographic, but also because of its anarchistic nature (and not just the content): There were no regular publishing schedules."[13]

Sex toys were a popular theme in underground comics in the 1970s, and their appearance demonstrates that sex toys were controversial enough to be thematically equated with the fringe elements of American culture. This change in the cultural status of sex toys was a radical shift.[14] From the early 1910s through the mid 1960s, vibrators were positioned as household appliances that reinforced separate spheres, and the archetypal vibrator user was depicted in advertisements as a chaste upper middle class housewife. But in the 1970s, the typical vibrator user was depicted in comix as a hypersexual feminist activist with an attitude.

---

[12] Jay Lynch, "Introduction," in *Underground Classics*, ed. James Danky and Dennis Kitchen, 13-15 (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2009), 15.

[13] Unlike their mainstream counterparts, underground comix were sold wholesale, so distributors were taking a risk when they bought them. They could not send back unsold copies for a refund, like they did with DC Comics. Not only were comix distributed differently, but their creators were paid more fairly. Instead of being given a set fee for their work, creators were given a percent of royalties. Ibid., 18.

[14] As I have mentioned earlier, the change in the meaning of sex toys was not universal. Vibrators continued to be sold as chaste massagers, but the predominant meaning of vibrators was as sex toys, which many perceived as culturally marginal objects.

Sex toy-themed comix had multiple narratives. Sometimes vibrators served as symbols for women's liberation. Other times vibrators were portrayed as threats to male sexuality that must be destroyed. Frequently, they were shown as adjuncts to sexually inadequate husbands and boyfriends. Sometimes traditional gender roles were reversed and men were depicted as delicate desexualized creatures who have value in the domestic world, while women were shown as having higher sex drives that could only be satisfied with vibrators.

Comix co-opted the vibrator-as-symbol-of-sexual-liberation trope from Dodson, Blank, and Williams. But this symbolic meaning did not go uncontested in comix. Sex toys were commodities, after all, and some sex-toy representations were negative, presenting vibrators and dildos as a part of the capitalist enterprise that those in the counterculture despised.

Joyce Farmer's cover for *Tits and Clits* is a prime example of the trope of the vibrator as political symbol (Figure 1) The cover shows three women proudly thrusting their vibrators in the air while participating in a women's liberation protest in front of the White House. A young blonde white woman with a wide smile on her face clutches her vibrating phallus, holding her hand is a young black woman with what looks like a Hitachi massager, and finally there is a winking older lady with an old-fashioned Wahl vibrator. "We Shall Overcome" is being sung in the crowd. In this comic, the vibrator serves as a symbol of freedom that unites members of the women's movement by liberating them from men. The vibrator is an object that embodies the feminist mantra of the time, "The Personal is Political."[15]

While sex toys symbolized empowerment for female comix artists, they were threats to male sexual power in male-authored comix. This was an echo of a larger fear that women's autonomy and the rising lesbian movement would render men unnecessary. In "The Fatal

[15] "Cover", Joyce Farmer, in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 3. (Laguna Beach, Ca.: Nanny Goat Productions, 1976), cover.

Orgasm," a story written by Brent Boates and published in *All-Canadian Beaver Comix*, sex toys kill the women masturbating with them. The story begins with a nude busty young woman masturbating with a plug-in phallic vibrator. As she is masturbating, the vibrator explodes, killing her. The scene then shifts to detective Vito Yarunski's office, where the cigar-smoking private investigator is greeted by a sexy client who is asking him to hunt down Dr. Von Shitz, inventor of the "deadly dildos."[16] (Figure 2) These dildos, which are really phallic vibrators, explode, killing their users, who are mainly young women. (Figure 3) Yarunksi eventually finds Von Shitz and kills him, saving the world from his deadly sex toys. The final panel shows the triumphant, erect Yarunski, in a bed with young women all competing to be the first to have sex with him. Above the image, the narrator says: "Dr. Von Shitz is dead and with him…his fiendish invention. Once again, young girls can experience sensuality without fear of their twats being blown to kingdom city!!" The underlying message is that sex toys disrupt the "natural" balance of sexuality, where men are the sole sources of stimulation for women. The only way to return to this state is by destroying the artificial devices that allow women to control their own sexuality.[17]

Of course this comic is a fantasy, but it represents a real anxiety about sex toys being a replacement for men, an anxiety that was not as prevalent when sex toys were merely presented as medical massagers or household appliances. Sex toys were rarely shown as replacements for husbands or boyfriends in comix, even ones drawn by women, perhaps because female comix artists' attempted to ease the male anxiety present around the devices.

---

[16] But she is not after justice, she just wants to find Dr. Von Shitz "so he can finish a new line of flavoured feminine hygiene deodorant." She then seduces Yarunski by asking him to try the deodorant. As he is performing cunnlingus on her, two assassins come in to kill Yarunski but they kill the woman instead. He proceeds to copulate with her skull. The scene shifts again to an all girls' school where masturbating girls are dying.

[17] Brent Boates, "The Fatal Orgasm," in *All Canadian Beaver Comix*, no. 1. (Last Gasp, 1974), 3-7.

In a prescient comix story called "Fuller Bush Person" that ran in *Tits and Clits* (1976), saleswoman Mary Multipary drives around town in a "clit-mobile" selling vibrators and contraceptives to housewives door to door. A symbol of female empowerment, the clit-mobile looks like a VW Beetle, except it has been adorned on the front grill with a large vulva featuring an enormous clitoris. (Figure 4) The story begins with Mary arriving at the house of a be-muumuu'd overweight female customer. Mary removes a vibrator kit from her suitcase and delivers her sales pitch.[18] "No more tedious clit twiddling on weekdays or compulsory cunnilingus on Saturday night…I recommend the starter kit with a 4 inch vibrator which prevents primary male jealousy," Mary says as the expectant client looks on.[19] That is all she needs to say to convince her customer. Later on she arrives at another house and the woman who opens the door and declares, "Oh Mary, I hate being married." She talks her into purchasing a vibrator by saying, "A vibrator isn't a substitute for a husband—it's in addition to one."[20] (Figure 5)

In "Fuller Bush Person," the artists Chin Lyvely and Joyce Farmer were conveying the anxiety vibrators caused in mainstream society. The housewives are stand-ins for the staid bourgeoisie whose sexual attitudes are much more conservative than Mary's, with her clit-mobile full of sex toys. Instead of showing the counterculture and mainstream society as diametrically opposed, this story presents a utopia where pro-sex radicals transform the lives of the housewives described in *The Feminine Mystique*. Mary assures worried women that their husbands will not be intimidated by vibrators that are smaller than the average penis.[21] Sex toys

---

[18] Chin Lyvely and Joyce Farmer, "The Fuller Bush Person," in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 2. (Laguna Beach, CA: Nanny Goat Productions, 1976). 9-11.
[19] Ibid., 9.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

do not have to threaten conventional society, Lyvely and Farmer imply, they can simply enhance it. Unlike the radical critiques of marriage being bandied about at the time, Lyvely and Farmer's viewpoint is more muted. They did not want to destroy marriage, just make it more fun. While some readers of *Tits and Clits* may have been radicals who saw an idealized version of themselves in the sex-toy sales woman, others saw themselves reflected in the sexually frustrated housewives. Many readers of comix were not radicals, but were using comix to participate vicariously in the sexual revolution.[22]

Because sex toys were products of commercial culture, the underground, with its critiques of consumerism, was not unanimously championing them. Anti-dildo animus reached its peak in comix with the long-haired pot-smoking character Harold Hedd. Like other hippie heroes of underground comix, Hedd was constantly fighting against the establishment. Unlike other comix heroes, he saw dildos as the ultimate symbol of capitalism. Hedd's philosophy on sex toys is summed up in this panel from a 1973 comic: "Ain't capitalism grand?!...It takes your prick away via sexual repression…to make you more work oriented…then sells you an improved plastic model that's Bigger! Harder! And guaranteed to stay up!"[23] (Figure 6) In Harold Hedd comix, dildos symbolized everything that was wrong with commercial culture. They were cheap imitations of nature, made of the most artificial material around.

To Hedd, dildos symbolized commercial culture's cooption of the underground movement by taking one of its most sacred tenets—free love—and selling it back to him. To repackage genitals as commodities highlighted the power of capitalism to infiltrate every aspect of human life. In another comic, Hedd is portrayed as a salesman of organic sex toys: "So Jus

---

[22] Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland,* 169-174.
[23] Rand Holmes, "Police Should Be Obscene and Not Absurd," in *Harold Hedd*, no. 2. (Kitchen Sink Enterprises, 1973), 2.

Remember Folks…When Yer Contemplatin Buying One of Those New Fangled Plastic Dildoes…Cucumbers are Organic! Tell Em Harold Hedd Said So and Don't Forget to Check for the Union Label!"[24] (Figure 7)

Underground Newspapers and Magazines

It was not just comix that criticized sex toys as being capitalistic, but also underground newspapers and magazines. Consumerism was endlessly pilloried in the counterculture but it was not as if the movement was truly anti-consumption; they were in favor of the "right" kind of commodities: bongs, marijuana, vinyl records. Sex toys provoked a very specific type of ire because they were perceived among some as insidious: appealing because they provided sexual pleasure, but unappealing because the pleasure they afforded was synthetic. Although underground newspapers ran ads for sex toys, they were criticized for doing so. "The plastic penis represents America's artificial and desperate attempt to create satisfaction in a society which is falling apart," said reader Tom Hayden in a letter to the editor in a 1968 edition of seminal underground paper *The Berkley Barb*.[25] Hayden was offended both by *The Barb*'s ads and by their story about delivering a vibrator wrapped in a scroll "with figures of nude women breaking their chains" to the Berkeley chapter of Women's Liberation. Hayden said that this story demonstrated "the sick male chauvinism that is emerging as a backlash against the women's liberation groups."[26]

Yet not all readers must have felt this way. In fact, *The Barb* prided itself on running openly sexual ads for vibrators in contrast to the "hypocritical" mainstream publications that ran

---

[24] Rand H. Holmes, "Like to Get Away from It All?" in *Harold Hedd*, no. 1. (Last Gasp, 1973), 36.
[25] "Tom Objects," in *The Berkeley Barb,* Vol. 7, no. 17, Oct. 18-25, 1968, 22.
[26] "New Free Zone," in *The Berkeley Barb,* Vol. 7, no. 16, Oct. 11-18, 1968, 5.

ads for vibrators marketed as health devices. A 1968 column in *The Barb* showed a picture of a vibrator ad from *TV Guide* with the following commentary below it:

> Now really folks, everything in the Barf is up front, but look at this soft core pornography, will you. Are the Birchers out there trying to suppress copies of TV GUIDE… That chick in the ad, what is she planning to do with that vibrator snuggled against her chin like that? Notice the closed eyed ecstatic expression, compare it to the ad for electric dildoes carried elsewhere in this paper. (There's usually one to be found).[27]

Although rhetoric surrounding the vibrator in underground and mainstream magazines was not nearly as heated or as widespread as that surrounding the dildo, the device did cause controversy. The lesbian comedian Robin Tyler characterized this viewpoint aptly in a 1978 issue of *Lesbian Tide,* describing the politically-correct feminist as ascribing to this motto: "Everybody should just drink carrot juice and celery juice, nobody should use a vibrator, everybody should have short hair and be a political butch.'"[28] While magazines and comix criticized vibrators for being capitalistic, films did not take sex toys seriously enough to engage in debates about them.

Movies

When sex toys showed up in movies in the 1970s they were usually in underground and cult films, although they sometimes appeared in mainstream comedies. Even in underground films, sex toys were either portrayed as dangerous or ludicrous, but never simply as a quotidian tool.[29] Women were rarely portrayed as masturbating with sex toys, and it was even more rare to

---

[27] "At the Flick," *The Berkeley Barb* Vol. 7, no. 16, Dec. 13-19, 1968, 13.
[28] "Profile Robin Tyler: Born Again Woman," Cheri Lesh. *Lesbian Tide,* Vol. 8, Issue 2 (Sep-Oct 1978), 8. For other discussions of dildos being non-politically correct in the feminist movement see, Barbara T. Kerr and Mirtha N. Quintaneles, "The Complexity of Desire: Conversations on Sexuality and Difference," *Conditions,* Issue 8, Spring 1982, 69.
[29] One possible exception is the Yugoslavian pseudo-documentary turned U.S. cult film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971),which explored the sexual revolution in communist and capitalist countries and featured Betty Dodson discussing the liberatory potential of masturbation,

see a woman have a sex toy-induced orgasm. Some films did show women having orgasms while using sex toys but usually the women were punished for it.

In the futuristic *Barbarella* (1968), Barbarella (Jane Fonda) has an orgasm while using a sex machine, but she nearly dies from it. In the film, a diabolical man escorts Barbarella to his "Excessive Machine," an enormous sex device that looks like a musical organ (Figure 8). He instructs her to get into the machine, and begins playing the keyboard, which causes Barbarella to squeal with pleasure. The machine removes all of Barbarella's clothes, as the man playing the machine says, "When we reach the crescendo, you will die of pleasure. Your end will be swift but sweet, very sweet." He starts playing more dramatically. Barbarella looks very sexually aroused and is sweating. Then she seems to have an orgasm. And the machine catches fire. The machine's operator becomes enraged and shouts at Barbarella:

> Wretched, wretched girl. What have you done to my Excessive Machine? You've outdone it. You've outdone me. The energy cables are shrinking. You've turned them into faggots. You've burned out the excessive machine. You've blown out all its fuses. You've exhausted its power. It couldn't keep up with you. This is incredible. What kind of girl are you? Have you no shame? Shame! Shame on you! You'll pay for this! I've got something in store for you. You'll wish you had died of pleasure before this day is done.[30]

Barbarella gets her orgasm, but it is at a large cost.[31] Barbarella subverts the intended use of the machine: instead of the machine killing Barbarella, she destroys it. Similar to the "The Fatal Orgasm," *Barbarella* depicts sex machines that give women orgasms as being so dangerous that they must kill their users. Like films during the Hays-code era, where an adulterous woman met an untimely death, in the 1970s a woman using a sex toy was also summarily punished.[32]

---

but Dodson did not mention vibrators. However, one of her sketches of a woman masturbating with a vibrator hangs in the background as she is being interviewed.

[30] *Barbarella.,* directed by Roger Vadim (Paramount Pictures, 1968).

[31] And it is not a masturbatory orgasm per se because the machine is operated by a man.

More typical was filmmakers using sex toys as comedic props, which allowed them to simultaneously display the threatening nature of female sexuality while also deflating it. This trope is on display in *First Nudie Musical* (1976). In one scene from the movie, the characters are rehearsing the musical number, "Dancing Dildos." (Figure 9) In the scene, men in dildo costumes awkwardly bumble across stage while topless women wearing see-through hoop skirts prance around them, as they join in song: "We're just dancing dildos are we/Dancing you see just for you/we're just dildos out on a spree." Mid-song, the women push the giant dildos' buttons, and the dildos begin to vibrate and topple over, interfering with the dancers' performances. By portraying the dildo as awkward and clumsy, the filmmaker deflates the threat of a mechanical penis, and instead shows the dildo as comically useless, unable to "stand up" and do its job. [33]

Another underground film, *Is There Sex After Death?* (1971) treats dildos as comedic and not erotic, even though it has a character in the film who is a professor of "dildography" and linguistics. In fact, dildos barely appear in the dildographer's scene. The bulk of the scene shows him using two giant feather-like devices to "awaken the sexuality" of the nude young women sitting to either side of him. Even though the scene is sexual, the dildo is desexualized and portrayed as a joke. The scene implies that men awaken female sexuality, and that sex toys are no match for sexual experiences with real people.[34]

Rarely are sex toys eroticized in underground films of the 1970s. Sex toys are shown as either being objects of humor or tools of domination, but depictions of them in a positive way as masturbatory aids or tools for partnered sex are nearly nonexistent. Even the X-rated cult film

---

[33] *First Nudie Musical,* directed by Mark Haggard & Bruce Kimmel (Paramount Pictures, 1976).
[34] *Is There Sex After Death?* directed by Jeanne and Alan Abel (Image Entertainment, 1971).

Myra Breckenridge (1970), based on the Gore Vidal novel of the same name, does not eroticize dildos and instead turns a dildo into a weapon of power that Myra (Raquel Welch) straps to herself and rapes her tied-up male student with. The filmmakers have no qualms about depicting an on-screen rape, but the dildo is such a controversial object that the film does not even display it. Instead, the director cuts to a scene of a giant log slamming into a wall and breaking through.[35]

Like underground films, mainstream movies also portrayed sex toys in a negative light. Even though such depictions were negative, the very existence of sex toys in mainstream films shows that sex toys were culturally salient. Woody Allen's films represent the range of sex-toy attitudes shown in mainstream movies in the 1970s. In Allen's movies the male fear of sex toys was more overt than in underground films. Allen's sex toy scenes portrayed the devices as threats to heterosexual relationships.

For example, in Allen's 1972 *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask* a vibrator appears in a vignette titled "why do some women have trouble reaching an orgasm?" Set in Italy, the story has the newly married Fabrizio (Woody Allen) attempting to give his wife Gina (Mia Farrow) an orgasm. Fabrizio tries all types of foreplay to no avail, and he finally employs a large phallic, off-white vibrator. He plugs the vibrator in and it immediately catches fire (Figure 10) before he has a chance to use it. Fabrizio soon discovers that Gina is an exhibitionist, and she can only have orgasms through having sex in public with him. In this scene the vibrator's threat is diffused by its catching on fire, and female sexual satisfaction is shown as resulting from sex with a male partner, not a mechanical device.[36]

---

[35] *Myra Breckenridge, d*irected by Michael Sarne (Twentieth Century Fox, 1970).
[36] *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask,* directed by Woody Allen (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1972).

Another Allen film equates the use of sex toys in a heterosexual relationship to insanity, thereby acknowledging the threat of sex-toy use in relationships and diffusing it. In *Annie Hall* (1977), after having difficulty in his relationship with Annie (Diane Keaton), Alvy (Allen) wanders around the streets of New York asking passers-by for relationship advice. One of the people he questions is an older man, to whom he asks this pointed question: "With your wife in bed, does she need some kind of artificial stimulation like marijuana?" The older man responds by saying, "We use a large, vibrating egg." Alvy is visibly appalled and says to the man, "A large vibrating egg. Well, I ask a psychopath, I get that kind of an answer." This joke only works because a large enough portion of the population knew that some couples used such sex toys, but because sex toys were not socially acceptable the presumption was that such couples were sexual outcasts.[37]

In *Sleeper* (1972), Allen once again critiques sex toys, this time in a scene where his character elucidates the advantages of human sex to machine sex. *Sleeper* depicts the sex of the future as happening in Orgasmatrons, which is Allen's parody of Reich's orgone machine. In a key scene, Luna (Diane Keaton) becomes attracted to Miles (Allen) and asks him, "Do you want to perform sex with me?...They have a machine here." Taken aback, Miles says, "Machine, I'm not getting into that thing. I'm strictly a hand operator. I don't like anything with moving parts that are not my own." After Miles kisses Luna she asks again, but Miles say, "No, we don't need that…Two minutes in bed with me and you'll sell that thing for scrap iron." The defensive attitude that Miles articulates expresses the belief that sex devices are threats to male sexual prowess, that if women use sex machines, they will lose interest in having sex with men. The

[37] *Annie Hall,* directed by Woody Allen (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1977).

scene implies that orgasms from "natural sex" are superior to those from "machine sex," and that the two types of sex are diametrically opposed to each other.[38]

Sex Toys in the 21st Century

Although sex toys began showing up in films and underground comics in the early 1970s, recent news stories claim that the history of sex toys in media is much more recent. These stories create a different narrative, which goes something like this:

> In 1998, the vibrator arrived in American culture courtesy of a *Sex and the City* episode where Charlotte became addicted to her Rabbit vibrator. Ever since then, Americans have become more accepting of sex toys as more and more TV shows, movies, and books discuss sex toys. We are shaking off our repression, paving the way for a taboo-less sex-toy future, a future where we will all become so inured to dildos that we will gift them to our grandchildren, display them on our mantles, and idly discuss them while getting our cars washed.[39]

This narrative arc, as I have shown in my dissertation, is false. One sure sign that a taboo still exists is the over-a-decade-long insistence that it is on the decline, and that in the near future it will be eliminated. Sex toys certainly are being openly discussed more than they have ever been before, but paradoxically sex toys are actually less present in American culture than when they were disguised. Advertisements for sex toys remain controversial. Newspapers no longer carry them.

Sex toys continue to make Americans deeply uncomfortable, as is shown by the fact that even in the 21st century most depictions of sex toys in popular culture are in comedic films and TV, with comedy diffusing the threatening nature of tools used for female masturbation. Why just seeing a dildo causes many to giggle is related to a deep discomfort with them. Sex toys continue to be displayed as cultural jokes because they are a signifier of a wider sexual anxiety in

---

[38] *Sleeper*, directed by Woody Allen (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1972).
[39] See, Jayson Sharon, "Many chain stores now add a toy aisle for adults," *USA Today*, May 31, 2012; Ruth Ferla, "Good Vibrations, Upscale Division," *New York Times*, Oct 03, 2004, ST13; Hillary Howard, "Vibrators Carry the Conversation," *New York Times,* April 20, 2011.

American culture as jokes usually are. Jokes, according to Freud, allow people to overcome their repression of the sex drive, and experience pleasure from "undisguised obscenity."[40] Laughing at a sexual joke allows people to release the psychical energy that is bottled up from inhibitions, and thereby gain freedom from the shame they feel when discussing sexuality. Sex-toy jokes allow the frequently repressed subjects of female masturbation and women's sexual desires to be discussed in culture in a way that lessens some of the anxiety these subjects usually bring.

The increase in sex-toy depictions can therefore be seen as simultaneously progressive and regressive. Americans are openly discussing sex toys more, but these discussions are fraught with anxiety. American culture features sex toys in our popular culture, but it rarely shows sex toys being used, and when such depictions are shown it is usually only in broad, low-brow comedies, a sign that sex toys, and the acts they are used for—female masturbation and orgasm—make the culture acutely uncomfortable.[41]

American cultural anxiety surrounding sex toys is typified by an episode of NBC's *The Office* (2007) where the characters are made so uncomfortable by sex toys that they can barely speak. In the show, which is filmed in a mockumentary style, Michael and his co-worker Ryan visit a sex-toy store and the filmmakers blur all the sex toys out. Vibrators and dildos are considered too offensive to be displayed within the fake documentary. In *The Office,* as in many other cultural depictions sex toys are used as a proxy for female sexuality. Having two awkward male characters enter a sex-toy store is a way to show their deep unease with and lack of knowledge of female sexual desire. As both characters wander around the store, the overt display of female sexuality renders them mute, until Ryan comments on the situation, saying to the

---

[40] Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 96.
[41] Ibid, 92, 96, 143.

camera, "[Michael] hasn't even said a word yet. Just giggling." Michael then takes a vibrator and pokes Ryan with it while saying "Gotcha.Gotcha." Michael calls a friend, announces that he is in a sex shop, and giggles.[42] He is both proud of entering a domain devoted in part to the female orgasm and also unsure of what this achievement means given that he does not know what to do once he is inside.

Although many mainstream films and broadcast and cable TV shows from the 1990s to 2014 featured sex-toy scenes, such scenes were usually incorporated into a larger narrative that played out a cultural scrip that showed the family and religious communites' inability to police their members' sexual behavior. In these storylines, characters are depicted attempting to hide their sex toys from their friends and family members to varying degrees of success, with all the comedic implications.

For example, in *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001), the film begins with the teenaged main character Janey watching a TV show while peeling away a gym sock to reveal a pink vibrator emblazoned with the phrase "My Lil' Vibrator." The vibrator disappears under her sheets as she begins masturbating. When she has obvious sexual arousal visible on her face, her father and brother walk in. "Morning sweetie," says the Dad as the mortified Janey tries to hide her arousal. "It's her birthday Dad. What's that buzzing sound?" her brother asks. "Maybe they're still doing the construction next door," responds her Dad. Her grandparents arrive in her room in quick succession with a cake. A priest and a bunch of small children follow. With her entire family in the room, her dog jumps on the bed and rips off the cover, revealing that she is masturbating with a vibrator. She has an orgasm and the vibrator flies out of the bed and onto the cake, splattering white frosting on her father's face, a "money shot" that uses the frosting as an ejaculate stand-in

[42] *The Office,* CBS, (Season 3: Episode 13 "Ben Franklin," 2007). A similar scene occurs in *Ghost World,* directed by Terry Zwigoff (United Artists, 2001).

to symbolize her orgasm. The vibrator floppily spins around in the middle in the cake, a ridiculous device.[43] In this scene, a rare portrayal of masturbation with a vibrator, Janey's orgasm is accompanied by the shame placed upon her by her family and larger community. *NATM* depicts female masturbation with a vibrator as a taboo, threatening act that potentially has profound effects on community stability. The scene graphically shows the loss of control the community has on private sexual behavior, and their inability to reign such behavior in.[44]

Similar themes appear in broadcast television shows. In CBS's *How I Met Your Mother* (2007), Lily, one of the main characters, is having a bridal shower. Lily's friend Robin buys Lily a vibrator, but when Robin shows up at the bridal shower, Lily's mother and grandmother are unexpectedly there. Robin is mortified to be presenting Lily with a masturbatory device in front of her relatives, so she puts another partygoer's card on top of the gift to make it seem as if it is from someone else. When Lily opens the card, Robin discovers that she had placed Lily's grandmother's card on the gift. Before Lily opens Robin's gift, she reads her grandmother's card, while Robin looks on in horror. Grandma Lois, oblivious to the fact that Lily is about to open up a vibrator, starts in on a soliloquy about the history of her gift.

> Honey, this handy little device has been in our family for generations. I used it. Your great grandmother used it. Now, her mother didn't use this one. But she used one just like it. Of course, back then they were made out of wood. Before that you just had to do it by hand. When I was a girl my mother taught me and my sister to use it. We used to have contests to see who could finish faster. It was so exciting! The whole family would gather around to watch. When I was a new bride, this is what kept me busy all those long nights when your grandfather was in Korea. Speaking of your grandpa, though I don't think he'd care to admit this to any of his army buddies, but he'd have a go at it every once in a while. And he enjoyed it. Open it up sweetie. May this gift bring you as much joy as it brought me.

---

[43] For more on this scene and the vibrator in American popular culture, see Lauren Rosewarne, *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 211-235.

[44] *Not Another Teen Movie,* directed by Joel Gallen (Columbia Pictures, 2001).

Lily opens up the gift to find a vibrator, and burns with embarrassment. "Grandma, um, wow," she says. "Well, Take it out honey. I want to show you how to use it," Grandma Lois responds, thinking that an antique sewing machine is in the box. But Robin interjects, "Don't take it out Lily. It's not your Grandma's gift. It's mine." Curious, all the women at the bridal shower gather around and discover a vibrator is in the box. An uncomfortable silence ensues that Grandma Lois breaks by saying, "It's just like the one Miranda gave to Charlotte on *Sex and the City*." Lily's Mom chimes in with: "So where do I get one of these?" Although Lily's family eventually has a positive reaction to the vibrator, it is a hard-won acceptance that arrives only after Lily is forced to imagine her mother, grandmother, and grandfather masturbating with the device. Such associations strip the vibrator of any eroticism and cause the vibrator to be associated with sexual disgust.[45]

Similarly, in HBO's *The Comeback* (2006) vibrators are de-erotcized by a family member. In one episode, actress Valerie Cherish is watching a scene from her sitcom with her husband and stepdaughter. In the scene, Valerie's character Aunt Sassy is unpacking her nieces' grocery bag. But instead of groceries being inside, there are condoms and lube. As Aunt Sassy pulls out the lube the bag starts vibrating. At this point, Valerie turns to her stepdaughter Francesca and asks, "Could you tell what was in the bag? Can't tell, can you?...Francesca could you tell what was in the bag at the very end? It was a vibrator. That's why it was vibrating." Valerie turns to her producer and says, "You probably shouldn't say vibrator in front of a child, right?" The vibrator—and by proxy, masturbation—are portrayed as embarrassing. Francesca is

[45] *How I Met Your Mother,* CBS, (Season 2: Episode 19 "Bachelor Party.")

faced with thinking about her stepmother's masturbation, and she now associates the sex toy with taboo images that desexualize the vibrator.[46]

Similarly, in *Made of Honor* (2008) sex toys are rendered innocuous by their association with a grandmother. In the scene, a sex-toy saleswoman is selling her wares at a bachelorette party. As she is finishing up her pitch, she asks, "Now ladies, what pleasure party would be complete without glow-in-the-dark thunder beads?" The bride's grandmother reaches for them and asks, "Where do these go?" as she puts the beads around her neck. The anal beads are transformed from a stimulating device to a boring piece of geriatric jewelry.[47] As physical representations of female masturbation, as taboo made totem, sex toys can only emerge in mainstream culture in a liminal state, in depictions that acknowledge the titillation of the device but then immediately destroy it through reinforcing the taboo and desexualizing the device.[48]

These scenes are about the policing of sex, a role that families and religious groups increasingly do not have any more. Comedies also show attempts of religious groups to reign in sex-toy use. In the *HIMYM* scene mentioned above, Robin is further embarrassed because Lily's cousin Margaret, who is studying to be a nun, is at the party. "God's watching. Excellent," Robin says to herself. In *NATM*, Janey is doubly ashamed because she masturbates with a vibrator in

---

[46] *The Comeback* (Season 1: Episode 6, "Valerie Saves the Day," 2005). Similarly, in *Easy A* (2010) high-school student Olive has received a wrapped gift from her male friend. Her mother brings the gift in Olive's bedroom and discusses the wonderful sex life that she has had with Olive's father. Olive gets increasingly embarrassed by all this sex talk and shoos her mother out of the room before she opens up the gift which is a vibrator and $200 Target gift card. A sense of relief that her mother was not in the room when she opened the gift washes over her face.

[47] Similar themes are visible in *Extreme Movie* (2008), where the main character ends up masturbating with a cellphone in front of her Dad, after her vibrator breaks, and in *That Awkward Moment* (2014), where a character dresses up in Halloween in a "Rock Out With Your Cock Out" costume, complete with a dildo coming out of his pants. While wearing the costume he meets his girlfriend's parents for the first time. Even documentaries show this theme. In the Israeli documentary *Lola* (2012), a mother opens up a sex shop to the embarrassment of her children and parents.

[48] *Made of Honor,* directed by Paul Weiland (Columbia Pictures, 2008).

front of a priest.[49] Even some of *Sex and the City*'s depictions of sex toys are fraught with religious anxiety. In an episode, Miranda's cleaning lady finds her vibrator and replaces it with a statue of the Virgin Mary to show her disapproval.[50] The implication of these depictions is that sex toys are antithetical to religion, that the two cannot coexist.

However, not all depictions draw a clear line between sex toys and religion. Some actually show an uneasy marriage between the two. In *Orgazmo* (1997) the lead character is a Mormon missionary who travels to Los Angeles to proselytize, and ends up becoming a porn star named Orgazmo. He uses this new-found career to fund his wedding. Orgazmo does not actually have sex in his movies, instead he a stuntman ("stuntcock") has sex for him. But in the pornographic film within a film he does give women orgasms with a sex toy called the Orgazmorator, which looks like a ray gun and bestows orgasm on all who are shot with it. The Orgazmorator allows Orgazmo to stay virtually monogamous to his fiancé, while making a living as a porn star. In this case, sex toys are used to further traditional values, as his fiancé agrees to marry him in the end even after she finds out about his secret porn-star career.

Even when sex toys seem to coexist with religion, as in Showtime's *Weeds* (2006), they are portrayed in a negative light. In a scene in *Weeds*, one of the main characters, Andy, seduces Yael, a female admissions counselor at the rabbinical school where he is studying. As they undress in her bedroom, Yael reaches under her bed and emerges grasping a giant black realistic looking dildo. Andy thinks she wants him to use the dildo on her, but instead she tells him to bend over and she sodomizes him with a strap-on dildo. Andy has a look of horror on his face as

---

[49] A related theme occurs in movies where characters masturbate with religious symbols. In the *Exorcist* (1973) the main character uses a crucifix like a sex toy, as does Divine in *Multiple Maniacs* (1970).

[50] *Sex and the City*, "Attack of the Five-Ten Women," (Season 3, Episode 33, 2000).

the sexual encounter begins. As in *Myra Breckenridge*, the dildo is portrayed as an intimidating, somewhat violent object that is at odds with its wearer's religious values.[51]

Even sex-toy scenes that lack religious themes fail to depict sex toys as erotic, instead opting to show sex toys as dangerous devices that are always breaking, causing injuries, or leading to addiction. Surprisingly these are the most common types of sex-toy scenes in *Sex and the City* (*SATC)*. Although *SATC* is (falsely) cited as having introduced the vibrator to mainstream American culture, a closer examination of sex toys in *SATC* demonstrates that sex toys are rarely depicted as effective masturbation devices. Most of the time when characters are shown using vibrators, they do not have orgasms with them, and when they do they are punished. Underlying many of the sex-toy scenes in *SATC* is the belief that vibrators are inferior to male sexual stimulation, reinforcing the cultural norm that men are supposed to supply women with sexual pleasure and that women should not be sexual autonomous beings.

In the most famous vibrator-themed episode, Miranda convinces Charlotte to buy a Rabbit vibrator and Charlotte is won over not only because it is "pink for girls!" but also because it is cute and does not look realistic (like a penis). The vibrator is only appealing to her because it lacks an erotic edge and instead conforms to typical gender stereotypes, with its bunny shape and traditionally female color. Charlotte has so many wonderful orgasms with it that she becomes addicted to it and masturbates all day long, ignoring her friends' requests to hang out. Her friends finally stage a "Rabbit intervention." The episode concludes with friends Carrie and Miranda confiscating her vibrator, because they want Charlotte to seek out sexual experiences with a man. The vibrator is presented as a device that causes isolation and loneliness, and a tool that prevents

[51] *Weeds* (Season 2, Episode 6, "Crush Girl Love Panic," 2006).

women from having relationships with men.[52] Similarly, other episodes show vibrators as inferior to male sexual stimulation. In one episode, Samantha is having trouble having an orgasm with a man, so she tries masturbating with a vibrator, but she still cannot orgasm. She finally has an orgasm later in the episode, with a man. [53] The social norm of relying on a man for orgasm is reinforced.

Even in the most positive depiction of vibrators in an episode of *SATC*, vibrators are not portrayed as neutral masturbation devices, and instead are machines that cause social upheaval. In this episode, Samantha's vibrator breaks while she is masturbating, thwarting her orgasm, and she goes to Sharper Image to replace it. Ignoring Samantha's protestations otherwise, the manager insists that the vibrator she bought is not a sex toy. She argues with him, an argument that escalates and draws the attention of the other female shoppers. Samantha capitalizes on this attention, and instructs the women in the store about the joys of using the massagers for masturbation. This scene demonstrates that vibrators continued to have dual meanings in the early 21st century and that their sexual uses remained controversial, even though these uses were openly discussed. In fact, the only time that vibrators are depicted as working well in *SATC* is when they are used for non-sexual purposes. In one episode, Miranda's infant son Brady's vibrating chair breaks, and Samantha uses her own vibrator to put Brady to sleep.[54]

While scenes of women using sex toys usually show sex toys failing to give women orgasms, scenes of male sex toy use usually involve men using sex toys as weapons. This trope plays on men's supposed fear of sex toys by sublimating that fear, causing it to emerge in the

---

[52] *Sex and the City* (Season 1, Episode 8, "The Turtle and the Hare," 1998).
[53] *Sex and the City* (Season 4, Episode 8, "My Motherboard, My Self," 2001).
[54] Ibid*,* (Season 5, Episode 6, "Critical Condition,"2002). Even dildos cause problems. Samantha, throws out her back when using a strap-on dildo to have sex with her girlfriend (Ibid*,* "Ghost Town," Season 4, Episode 5, 2001).

theme of the weaponized dildo. This theme subverts dildos' intended uses and transforms them from potentially emasculating devices into somewhat empowering devices.[55]

By retooling dildos into weapons, filmmakers deflate the threat of the dildo by robbing the dildo of its meaning as a female masturbation device and turning it into a device that serves to show the homoeroticism underlying displays of masculinity. For example, in *Neighbors* (2014), a fraternity house moves in next door to Mac, the lead character, who lives with his wife and baby. The head of the fraternity is the muscular Teddy, who Mac thinks is "beautiful." Mac is both attracted to Teddy and threatened by Teddy's sexual prowess with women, particularly because Mac is rarely having sex with his wife. In one scene, Mac starts a fight with Teddy and they both use dildos as weapons.[56] Mac's ambivalence about his sexual attraction to Teddy is expressed symbolically through his desire to touch his dildo to Teddy's, a desire that he gives into in a typically masculine, aggressive manner.[57]

A similar scene shows up in *Borat* (2006) where Borat (Sasha Baron Cohen) discovers his assistant Azimat masturbating to pictures of Pamela Anderson, who Borat is in love with. Borat confronts Azimat and begins fighting with him. The both rip off each other's clothes and

---

[55] One exception is HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, (Season 8, Episode 9, "Mister Softee," 2011), where Larry's car has a broken passenger seat that vibrates uncontrollably, producing orgasms in all the lucky women who get to ride in it. As he is driving a woman he is dating to his apartment in an attempt to engage in postprandial intercourse, the woman achieves spectacular orgasm in the car, becomes sleepy, and decides not to go up to Larry's apartment. At the time, however, he is so clueless that he does not realize that a woman has just orgasmed in his car. It takes his roommate Leon to discover the secret powers of his car seat. When he takes a ride with Larry, he explains the situation to him, declaring, "This shit is a moving dildo…This chair is a fuck machine. Man cannot compete with machinery." After Leon's revelation, Larry recognizes that his vibrating passenger-side chair is more capable of pleasing a woman than he is. Not only do women like his giant sex toy more than they like him, but also he is unwittingly forced to transport this extraordinary vibrator, forcing him to be reminded of his sexual inadequacies time and time again. Larry is symbolically castrated by his car.

[56] *Neighbors* also has the leaders of the fraternity save their ailing frat by selling dildos made from casts of their penises.

[57] *Neighbors,* directed by Nicholas Stoller (Universal Pictures, 2014).

the fight spills out into the hotel, with a naked Borat chasing a naked, obese Azimat through the halls with a dildo shaped like a rubber hand. The dildo serves as a symbol of sexual dominance of Borat over Azimat, yet the fact that they are wrestling with each other nude underscores the homoeroticism of the scene. And in *Bruno* (2009), the gay title character, played once again by Cohen, takes a self-defense class from a presumably straight man. Bruno asks the instructor if he can teach him how to defend himself from homosexuals who are using dildos as weapons (Figure 11). The instructor agrees, and they spar with each other with dildos, wrestling while their bodies lock together. The homophobia of the instructor is belied by his obvious joy in fighting with dildos.[58]

Although weaponized dildos serve to underscore homoeroticism in films, in videogames this theme is absent. Instead the dildo is used as a deadly weapon, unlike *Borat* and *Neighbors*, where the violence is more comical. The symbol of the deadly dildo winds the sex and death drives together into a physical form.[59] For example, in *Saints Row*: *The Third* (2011) and *Saints Row IV* (2013) players can acquire The Penetrator, which is a large purple dildo attached to a baseball bat. (Figure 12). Both female and male characters can use the Penetrator, which retains some eroticism with its clearly defined head and realistic-looking veins.[60] Although the dildo is represented as a threatening object in the game, the player is in control of it and can use it as a

---

[58] *Borat,* directed by Larry Charles (Twentieth Century Fox, 2006); *Bruno*, directed by Larry Charles (Universal Pictures, 2009).See also, *Jackass Number Two* (2006), where Bam Margera is subjected to a dildo prank that involves having a dildo violently shot into his anus by another man.

[59] "The Penetrator: Saint's Row Wiki," accessed August 22,2014, http://saintsrow.wikia.com/The_Penetrator

[60] In fact, it was too realistic for officials in Japan, who required that the veins be removed from the Penetrator before its release in that country, demonstrating that in some cases Americans are more accepting of sex toys than other countries. Jim Reily, "Saints Row Penetrator Altered in Japan," *Game Informer,* November 10, 2011, accessed August 22, 2014, http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2011/11/10/saints-row-penetrator-altered-in-japan.aspx

tool to advance through their in-game life. The Penetrator empowers players by sublimating the sexual threat of the dildo, transforming its sexual power into violent power.

Some games that feature the deadly dildoes also feature dildoes as sex toys. One game that does this is *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), where dildoes show up in the game as both weapons and gifts. Players can purchase dildos at sex shops to give as presents to their girlfriends or they can acquire a chainsaw with an attached dildo as a weapon to attack other characters. [61] That a dildo can both be used to kill and to sexually satisfy a character speaks to the conflicted status of dildos in American culture.

It is very rare for popular culture to discuss men using sex toys for anything other than violence. Yet some scenes explore men's use of sex toys for masturbation. One example can be seen in *Louie* (2014), when Louie's friend reveals that he uses a vibrator during masturbation; however, this portrayal is hardly positive. Louie's friend is roundly made fun of by his other friends at the poker table, reinforcing the idea that a man using a vibrator is violating a sexual taboo.

Even though his friend was mocked, Louie is inspired to purchase a vibrator. Louie goes to a sex store, but he throws out his back pointing at a vibrator and leaves without buying one. So, he goes to his doctor who offers no advice for his bad back, but the female receptionist does. She takes a Hitachi magic wand and begins vibrating her back, while making suggestive moans, and she urges Louie to purchase the same device. Louie buys one immediately. He goes back to his apartment and closes the door. And we never learn what he does with it. Even *Louie,* a show so politically incorrect that AIDS jokes are a regular staple, cannot show its main character masturbating with a vibrator. The show ends with the taboo against male sex-toy use being

[61] Other *Grand Theft Auto* games feature dildos, including *Grand Theft Auto IV*, where they are used as weapons. http://gta.wikia.com/Dildo

firmly intact. It seems like the only acceptable way to show men using sex toys in American popular culture is if they are using them to attack each other.[62]

Conclusion: What Sex Toys Can Tell Us About American Culture

So why should we care about the history of sex toys in America? Is there a good reason that they have been left in the dustbin of history, that the Smithsonian refused to let the *History* channel show its rectal dilators when it channel came to do a story on what is hiding in "America's attic"? It is precisely because we try to hide this history that it should be studied. What makes us uncomfortable as a nation can illuminate our values. The past 150 years of American history demonstrate that American culture has been simultaneously obsessed with sex and terrified of its power. The sex toy makes literal and visceral this contradiction in cultural attitudes towards sex. Studying the history of sex toys not only illuminates the history of sexuality in America, but it also shines a light on the histories of technology and consumption.

Sex-toy history demonstrates how deeply the fear of sex has been embedded in American culture throughout history and how this fear continues to shape modern society. Fear of sex toys is really a fear of masturbation magnified and reified. We fear sex toys because women are the most prominent users of them, making sex toys physical representations of women's unbridled sexuality. They remind us of how powerful women's sex drive is. A sex toy is an artifact that attests to women's insatiability and the inability of male genitalia to bring orgasms to most women. While the media may be openly discussing sex toys more than they ever have before, we have not come to terms with them because we have not come to terms with women's sexuality and its social disruptiveness.[63] To embrace sex toys is to acknowledge that

---

[62] *Louie,* (Season 4, Episode 1, "Back," 2014).

[63] That such a common activity is taboo is remarkable. It demonstrates the enormous gulf between private sexual behavior and public declarations.

human anatomy is flawed, that, in some cases, women prefer machines to humans. The thought is frightening to many.

For all that the sex toy can tell us about sexuality, it is important to remember that sex toys are technologies, and their history demonstrates that taboos shape technological development. Throughout history, sex toys have often been on the cutting edge of consumer technologies, created with the newest materials. Yet because these technologies have historically had to remain concealed as non-sexual devices, innovation is stifled. Few innovators seek to enter businesses that are illegal, as the social costs and potential legal ramifications are too high. And even when sex toys are openly sold as sexual devices in the 21st century, they remain taboo, which prevents many from wanting to invest in research and development, impeding the technology from progressing at the same rate as other technologies. One would think that sexual technologies would be celebrated and promoted in the 21st century, an era of technological enthusiasm, but ironically sex toys are one of the only technologies that are not championed.

Sex-toy history can also tell us about the history of consumption. Even though capitalism fulfills a multitude of human desires, including many that are harmful, the desire for sex toys, which meet a fundamental human drive, remains too controversial for our capitalistic culture to fully embrace. As marketing becomes more and more sophisticated, specifically in using sex appeals, advertising for sex toys remains rudimentary. You can use sex to sell anything except sex toys. As sex becomes more explicit, it also is more restricted. For example, Apple does not want their brand tarnished by associations with sex, so they began removing apps with "overtly sexual content" from the iTunes store in 2010.[64]

---

[64] Jenna Wortham, "Apple Bans Some Apps for Sex-Tinged Content," *New York Times,* February 22, 2010.

As my dissertation has shown, the history of sex toys in America, and correspondingly the history of sexuality in America, is not a story of repression to liberation, nor is it a story of liberation to repression. It is not linear; it is messy. It is a story of continuous anxiety surrounding sex, of willful deception from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, of pretending that devices that we used on our genitals could not possibly bring us sexual pleasure.

It is this cultural self-deception that can teach us about attitudes toward sexuality, consumption, and technology during the second half of the 19th century. We used the new material of rubber to create sex devices yet pretended that that was not what they were. Rectal and vaginal dilators, we told ourselves, were strictly medical devices and as such they were cold and therapeutic and brought us no pleasure. We would conceal the sexual uses of the technology, impeding innovation. We could not speak openly about masturbation in our advertising or in journals, yet we knew, on some level, that our medical dilators were used for this purpose. Occasionally moralists would point out that a vaginal dilator that owed a resemblance to a penis should be reclassified as a "masturbatory article." Or a writer of erotic novels would make the same point. And a realization would come to the surface that we were deluding ourselves, and that, in fact, we were a nation of masturbators. But we would fight and try to bury these truths under the guise of the medical, as Foucault would call it the *scientia sexualis*. This schizophrenic attitude towards sex toys illuminates the schizophrenic attitude we had towards sex during this period. We could let sex be visible as long as we did not acknowledge what it was. We could show sex but not name it.

In the early 20th century we hid the vibrator in a similar way. We said it was an electrotherapeutic and home appliance, but we knew that it had sexual uses. However, it was safer to pretend it did not. But in the 1970s, some feminists began to speak out about the sexual

uses of vibrators. They began to acknowledge what had been left largely unspoken for over a century. They pulled back the curtain, hoping to free us from our hypocrisy, to acknowledge vibrators for what they were. And American culture shrunk back in fear, a fear of female masturbation, a fear that women would enjoy sex by themselves more than sex with men. That many women used machines to masturbate with devices that were much more powerful and effective than many a man's penis or tongue or hands, well that was considered an improper use of technology. The vibrator, which had glided through culture as an innocent, a technology marketed to children and grandparents, suddenly became a technology for lesbians and hypersexual women, a technology used by the Other, which impeded its technological development.

And the new open, unironic sexuality of the vibrator caused capitalism to fear it and to shrink away from promoting it, with publications rarely allowing ads for sex toys, and when they deigned to do so, they sequestered them in tiny classified sections in the back of papers, hoping that they would not draw too much attention. This prevented many potential sex-toy users from seeing the ads and forced current sex-toy users to be intrepid in hunting down the newest models. Even some of the Others disowned sex toys. They were too radical for some in the counterculture, but they cloaked their fear as a fear of capitalism and plastic, not a fear of female masturbation because those in the counterculture had to keep up appearances of being sexually liberated, so they could not say that masturbation scared them. The vibrator became a political symbol because only the truly brave would embrace the openly sexual technology that capitalism had shunted to its corners. But the openly sexual sex toy had entered American culture, and there was no going back.

By the 1980s sex toys remained marginal. But the AIDS crisis of the 1980s added new layers of meanings and struggles onto sexual devices. Although masturbation was embraced as a way of eroticizing safer sex and preventing the transmission of HIV, sex toys were portrayed as potential vectors of disease by moralists who associated sex toys with gay men and lesbians. The meaning of sex toys was once again transformed by fear. However some in the gay and lesbian press continued to tout sex toys as symbols of liberation and embraced their use in masturbation as a way to avoid getting HIV.

In the 1990s, sex toys tiptoed into cable television, and many heralded this as a triumph and as proof of our comfort with the subject, but as I have shown above, most of the depictions illustrate just the opposite: our deep anxiety towards sex toys. Pop culture references were our way of attempting to ease that anxiety.

The 21st century saw sex toys plunge into the mainstream of popular culture. Most narratives present this as an acceptance of the devices. However, it is not a full acceptance of sex toys; it is more like an acknowledgement that many women use sex toys. Yet as we recognize their utility, we also fear it. So most portrayals show families and religious officials aghast at their members' sex toy use and women becoming antisocial after using sex toys and getting addicted. We play out a narrative in our popular culture where we destroy the sexual technology or the technology destroys us: vibrators kill their users, men brandish dildos and beat each other with them, and sex toys spontaneously catch fire and burn down hotels.[65] This narrative demonstrates that the taboo of sex toys is alive and well. A woman cannot masturbate to orgasm with a vibrator in American pop culture without being punished for it.

---

[65] *Just Married*, directed by Shawn Levy (Twentieth Century Fox, 2003).

If the past is any indication, we will continue to feature sex toys in our popular culture more than we ever have before. We will tell ourselves that because we talk about sex toys a lot, we are a sexually progressive culture, that we embrace masturbatory technologies, that we are not Comstockian or prudish, that we celebrate female masturbation with inanimate objects, that we are no longer afraid. We will say all these things, not disingenuously, but with conviction. We will believe them, because it makes us feel good to do so. We want to believe that we are liberated and that we are no longer jealous of our sexual machines, that we have embraced them, celebrated them even. Featuring a taboo object in cultural representations does not necessarily eliminate that taboo. It is not enough to simply joke about the taboo, although joking about it is a start. But we must be able to show sex toys in popular culture without constantly having to have a cultural conversation about how progressive we are.

Why we have such trouble being comfortable with depictions of sex toys is because we still have trouble having conversations about sex in America. And we have even more difficultly discussing masturbation. We are talking about sex more, but we are more comfortable having serious discussions about sexual identity than we are having serious discussions about sexual behavior. A sign that we will have begun to embrace sex toys in American culture is not when they are featured all over our popular culture, but when we show sex toys being used, when women and men are shown masturbating to orgasm without dying or without the Hays-code-esque shaming of having a Priest or nun in the room. Yet the greatest step we have not even come close to achieving. And that is becoming comfortable enough with sex toys that we can advertise them in our media without an uproar.

Even now as most legal restrictions have been lifted—it is still illegal to sell sex toys in Alabama—societal restrictions have not gone away. In 2010, MTV refused to air a Trojan

Vibrating Triphoria commercial unless the word "vibrator" was removed. Even the revamping of the vibrator ad drew complaints to the FCC. Said one viewer, "I have seen this new commercial for the 'Trojan Triphoria' female vibrator during the day…It explains how it blows the mind out [of] the woman that uses it, all the accessories, etc. It's a most disgusting commercial and I cannot believe there are these types of commercials during the day."[66] Even as fairly chaste vibrator ads raise ire, the networks run innumerable explicit ads for erectile dysfunction –"you may have an erection lasting four or more hours"—with very little protest. And vibrator companies insist on promoting the ideal of the monogamous heterosexual relationship in their advertisements.

What this shows is that we are comfortable discussing male sexuality because it is less threatening. It is female sexuality that terrifies us. Conservative pundits lament the sexualization of the American media in the 21st century, but an analysis of sex toy advertisements from the past one hundred years demonstrates that when it comes to sex toys, we are still Victorian.

The history of sex toys is incomplete in part because we are afraid to take seriously our deepest desires, our animalistic impulses made plastic, our pulsating phallic vibrators. This fear

---

[66] Complaint from viewer in Maple Valley, WA, about "Trojan Triphoria" ad that aired December 31, 2010 on a *Saturday Night Live* episode that was shown on VH1. FCC/Enforcement Bureau, IHD-Investigation and Hearings. Informal complaints received by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding the television show 'Saturday Night Live,' 2008-2012. Other consumers have complained about sex toys being discussed on *Two Broke Girls,* See complaint from viewer in Old Tappan NJ 07675 about *Two Broke Girls* that aired November, 12, 2012, on CBS, Referral date November 27 2012. Complaint from viewer in Jacksonville, FL NJ about *2 Broke Girls* that aired November 11, 2011, on CBS, Submitted date November 21, 2011, complained about vibrator joke. Also another complaint from Enterprise, Alabama, November 7, 2011, about sex toys on the show aired on the same day of complaint. "Informal complaints received by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding the television show '2 Broke Girls,' 2011-2013, Released Date December 5, 2013." Obtained from Government Attic, accessed August 20, 2014, http://www.governmentattic.org/10docs/FCC_Complaints2BrokeGirls_2011-2013.pdf

has led us to erase this history, for archives to ignore it, for scholars to overlook the roiling spirit of American entrepreneurship that undergirded the sex-toy industry. But the history of sex toys can teach us a lot. It can tell us that we are not as sexually liberated as we think we are, that the women's movement remains incomplete, that users play a fundamental role in reshaping the function of technologies, and that consumer society did not sexualize American culture, but embraced it strategically. We should not ignore aspects of our past that embarrass us or make us deeply uncomfortable. The artifacts that are hidden by a society can tell us more about human nature than the ones it proudly displays.

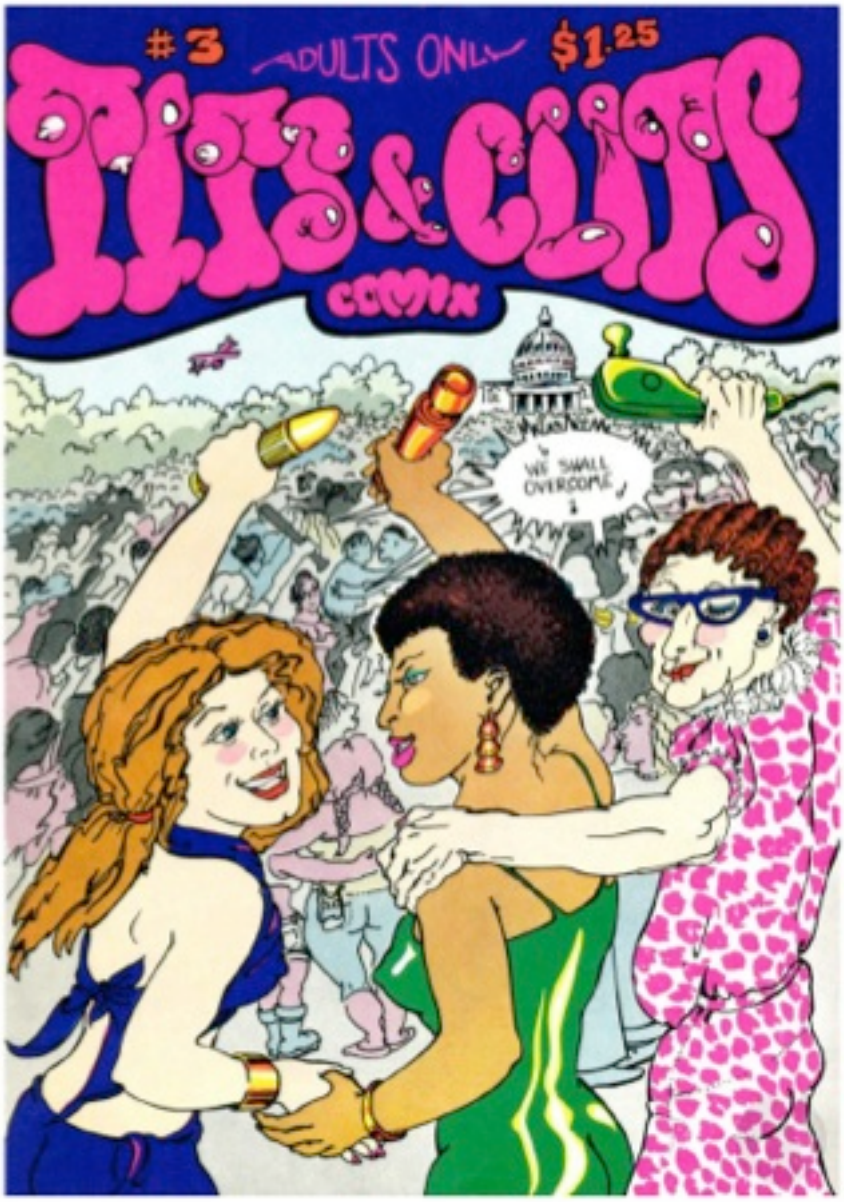


Figure 1: Cover of *Tits and Clits Comix,* 1976, showing women celebrating vibrators.
Source: "Cover", Joyce Farmer, in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 3. (Laguna Beach, Ca.: Nanny Goat Productions, 1976).

Figure 2: Panel from "The Fatal Orgasm," *All Canadian Beaver Comix,* 1974
Source: Brent Boates, "The Fatal Orgasm," in *All Canadian Beaver Comix*, no. 1. (Last Gasp, 1974).

Figure 3: Panel from "The Fatal Orgasm," *All Canadian Beaver Comix,* 1974
Source: Brent Boates, "The Fatal Orgasm," in *All Canadian Beaver Comix*, no. 1. (Last Gasp, 1974)

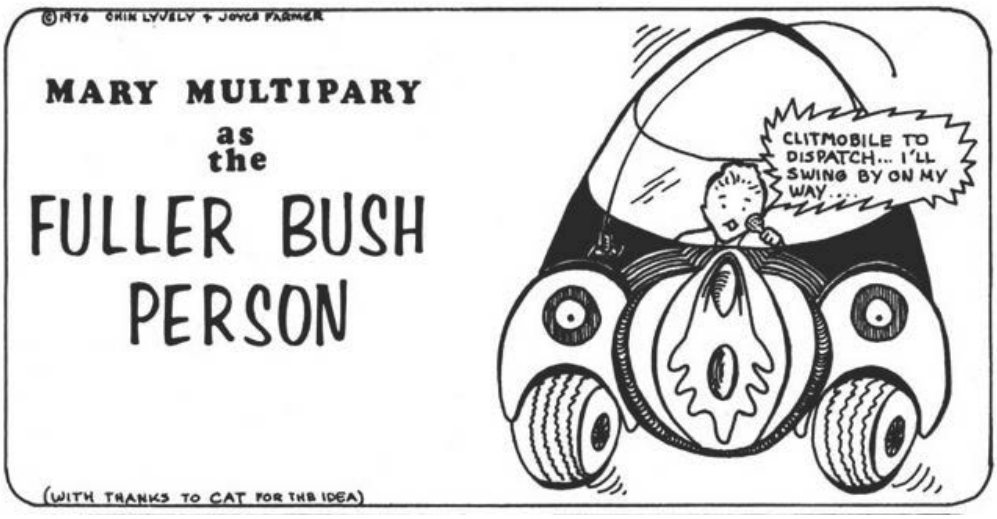


Figure 4: Panel from "The Fuller Bush Person," *Tits &Clits Comix,* 1976.
Source: Chin Lyvely and Joyce Farmer, "The Fuller Bush Person," in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 2. (Laguna Beach, CA:Nanny Goat Productions, 1976).

Figure 5: Panel from "The Fuller Bush Person," *Tits &Clits Comix,* 1976.
Source: Chin Lyvely and Joyce Farmer, "The Fuller Bush Person," in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 2. (Laguna Beach, CA:Nanny Goat Productions, 1976).

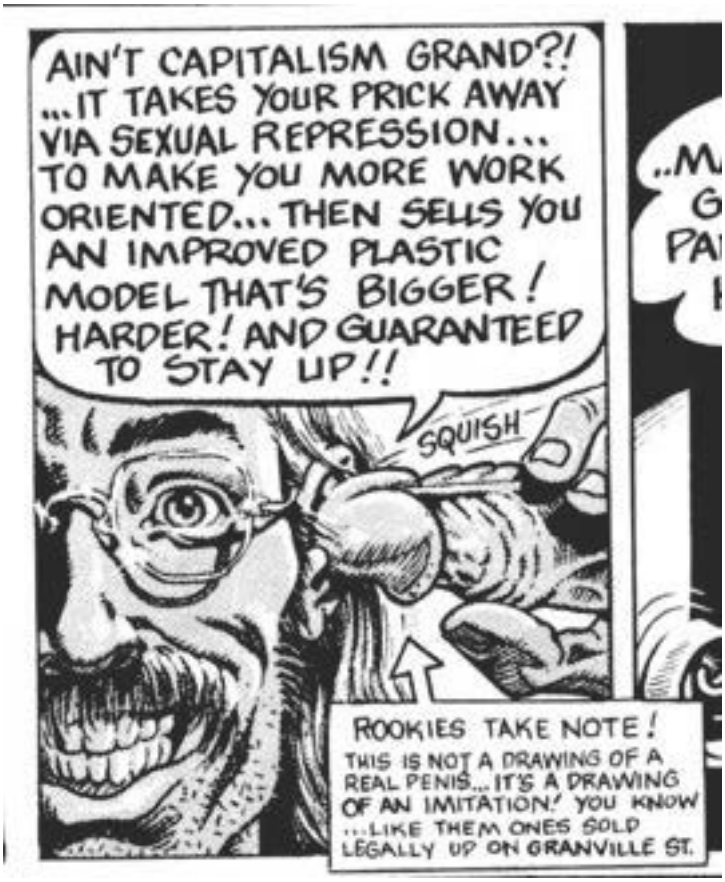


Figure 6: Panel from "Police Should Be Obscene and Not Absurd," *Harold Hedd*, 1973. Source: Rand Holmes, "Police Should Be Obscene and Not Absurd," in *Harold Hedd*, no. 2. (Kitchen Sink Enterprises, 1973), 2.

Figure 7: Fake ad for organic dildos in *Harold Hedd* comix, 1973.
Source: Rand H. Holmes, "Like to Get Away from It All?" in *Harold Hedd*, no. 1. (Last Gasp, 1973), 36.

Figure 8: Barbarella (Jane Fonda) in the Excessive Machine in *Barbarella.* 1968. Directed by Roger Vadim. Paramount Pictures.
Source: http://scifiinterfaces.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/barbarella-104.jpg

Figure 9: "Dancing Dildos" number from *First Nudie Musical.* 1976. Directed by Mark Haggard & Bruce Kimmel. Paramount Pictures.
Source: http://magasinetneo.se/artiklar/porrigaste-decenniet/

Figure 10: Fabrizio (Woody Allen) attempts to use a vibrator to arouse his wife Gina (Mia Farrow) in the vignette "why do some women have trouble reaching an orgasm?" in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask*. 1972. Directed by Woody Allen. Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Source: corbisimages.com

Figure 11: Bruno (Sacha Baron Cohen) learns how to fend off dildo-welding combatants in *Bruno.* 2009. Directed by Larry Charles. Universal Pictures.Source: http://stevenknight.info/2009/07/vassup-er-ist-brno/

Figure 12: Scene from the videogame *Saints Row: The Third,* 2011.
Source: http://saintsrow.wikia.com/The_Penetrator

Bibliography

Archival Collections

District of Columbia

National Museum of American History Archives Center, Washington, D.C.
Division of Medicine and Science, Artifact Collection
Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers 1927-2002.
N.W. Ayer Advertising Agency Records
Warshaw Collection of Business Americana

National Museum of American History Library, Washington, D.C.
Trade Literature Collection

National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789-2011, Office of Post and Office of Solicitor

Illinois

American Medical Association, Chicago, IL.
Historical Health Fraud Collection.

Indiana

Kinsey Institute Collections. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
Sex Aids Dealers (U.S.) (20th c. 1960-1979)
Sex Aids Dealers, United States, 20th Century (1980-1999)

Massachusetts

American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA
Trade Catalogs

Minnesota

The Bakken Museum, Minneapolis, MN.
Artifact Collection and Library
Trade Literature Collection

Wisconsin

Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

Dorothy Dignam Papers
Ralph Ginzburg Papers
John Sumner Papers

Racine Heritage Museum Archives, Racine, WI.
Hamilton Beach Collection

London, England

Science Museum, London, England.
Medical Object Collection, Blythe House

Interviews

Joani Blank, founder of Good Vibrations, interviewed on April 1, 2014
Betty Dodson, author of *Liberating Masturbation*, interviewed on January 15, 2014
Gosnell Duncan, inventor of silicone dildos, interviewed on August 2, 2013
Dell Williams, founder of Eve's Garden, interviewed on November 19 and 22, 2013

Primary Sources

The Adult Business Mail Marketing Guide. Washington, D.C.: RPE Publications, 1979.

"Akron Men Seized in Purity Crusade." *Cleveland Plain Dealer.* October 25, 1911, 1 & 4.

Andis Clipper Company, "The Home of Precision-Built Tools: A conducted Tour Through the Andis Clipper Company at Racine, Wis.," 1952.

Ashbee, Henry Spencer. *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature Index Librorum Prohibitorum: being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono- graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books.* London: privately printed, 1877.

"At the Flick." *The Berkeley Barb* Vol. 7, no. 16, Dec. 13-19, 1968.

Barbach, Lonnie. *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality.* Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1976.

Barnes, Robert. *A Clinical History of the Medical and Surgical Diseases of Women.* London: J& A Churchill, 1873.

Barrère, Albert and Charles Godfrey Leland, eds. *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant: Embracing English, American and Anglo-Indian Slang, Pidgin English, Tinkers' Jargon, and other Irregular Phraseology, Volume 1*. Ballantyne Press, 1889.

Bennett, D.R.M. *Anthony Comstock: His Career of Cruelty and Crime*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971. (Originally published in 1878. The DaCapo version is a reprint).

"The B.F. Goodrich Co. Manufacturers of India Rubber and Druggist Sundries," (Catalog) Columbia Rubber Works Co. 66 &68 Reade St., New York. Circa early 1900s.

Boates, Brent. "The Fatal Orgasm." In *All Canadian Beaver Comix*, no. 1. Last Gasp, 1974.

Boston Women's Health Collective, *Women and Their Bodies: A Course.* Boston Women's Health Collective, 1970.

Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Our Selves.* New England Free Press, 1971.

Brody, Leigh and M. Duck "Two Views on Loving Women." *Lavender Woman,* vol. 4. no. 3, (June 1975).

Bryson, Charles Lee, ed. *Health and How to Get It.* Racine: Hamilton Beach Manufacturing Company, 1912 & 1927.

"Business in the Other Courts: United State Circuit Court. Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail." *New York Herald,* July 2, 1873.

"Business in the Other Courts: United States Circuit Court. Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail," *New York Herald*, July 4, 1873.

Califia, Pat. "Lesbian Literature Meets the Sexual Revolution." *Sinister Wisdom,* Issue 2 (Fall 1976).

Califia, Pat. "In Response to Dorchen Leidholdt's 'Lesbian S/M: Radicalism or Reaction." *New Women's Times*, vol. 8, no. 9, (October 1982).

"Charge of Sending an Obscene Article Through the Mail: Before Judge Benedict and a Jury." *New York Herald Tribune.* January 6, 1874.

"City Intelligence: A Comstock Raid; Numerous Arrests and Seizures; Enforcing the State Law; Last Night's Arrests." *Commercial Advertiser,* New York, NY. August 10, 1875.

Comfort, Alex. *The Joy of Sex: A Gourmet Guide to Love Making*. New York: Simon and Schuster Fireside Books, 1972.

Comstock, Anthony. *Frauds Exposed.* New York: J. Howard Brown, 1880.

Comstock, Anthony. *Traps for the Young.* New York: Funk and Wagnells Co., 1883.

"Comstock Pilots Patrol Cart Raid." *Plain Dealer*, October 26, 1911. Cleveland, Ohio.

Craddock, Ida C. *The Wedding Night,* pamphlet. New York: Ida Craddock, 1900.

"The Danger of Glass Vaginal Dilators." Letter to *Medical News* August 2, 1884, 45, no. 5.

Davis, N.S. "Clinical Cases from Practice: Vaginismus," *Chicago Medical Examiner* 9, no. 9 (September 1868).

"Detective Comstock Assaulted." *New York Herald Tribune,* July 3, 1873.

Dodson, Betty. "Getting to Know Me," *Ms.* August 1974.

Dodson, Betty. *Liberating Masturbation*. New York: Betty Dodson, 1974.

"Dongs: The Images of Men," Doc Johnson Marital Aids Catalog, 1977.

Drexler, Rosalyn. "The Style of the 70's." *New York Times,* Jun 05, 1977, BR6.

Eberhart, Noble Murray. *A Brief Guide to Vibratory Techniques*. Rev. ed.. Chicago: New Medicine Publishing Company, 1913.

Ellis, Havelock. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol 1.: The evolution of modesty: the phenomena of sexual periodicity, auto-erotism*, 3rd Edition. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1921.

EMF Electrical Yearbook. Chicago, IL: Electrical Trade Publishing, 1921.

Eve's Garden Catalog. New York, New York: 1975.

"Facts on Quacks: What You Should Know About Health Quackery" (c.1960)

Farmer, Joyce. "Cover," in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 3. Laguna Beach, Ca.: Nanny Goat Productions, 1976.

Fullerton, Patricia. "Dilemma of the Modern Lesbian." *Lavender Woman,* vol. 1, no. 3, 1972.

Galabin, Alfred Lewis. *A Handbook of the Diseases of Women.* Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, 1882.

Gazam, Audley M. & H. Chas Ulman, eds. *The National Bankruptcy Register: A Record*

of Law Reports and Proceedings in Bankruptcy in All the States. Vol. 4, No. 21, Supplement.

Good Vibes Gazette. San Francisco, California, 1985.

Goodyear, Charles. *Gum-Elastic and Its Varieties: with a detailed account of its applications and uses, and of the discovery of vulcanization*. New Haven: Published for the Author, 1853.

Goodyear Rubber Company Trade Journal No. 4, (Baltimore: Fall 1877), 2. Duke University Library Digital Collections, http:/library.duke.edu/digital collections

"Grand Fancy Bijou Catalog of the Sporting Men's Emporium." Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 1870.

Granville, Joseph Mortimer. *Nerve Vibration and Excitation as Agents in the Treatment of Functional Disorder and Organic Disease*. London: J & A Churchill, 1883.

Granville, Joseph Mortimer. "Therapeutics of the Nervous System: Nerve Vibration in the Treatment of Nervous Diseases," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, (March 1883).

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch* (New York: Paladin, 1970).

Hamilton Beach, "New Life Catalog*."* Hamilton Beach Company. Racine, Wisconsin, circa 1915.

Hamilton Beach Price List. Hamilton Beach Company. Racine, Wisconsin. 1926.

Hamilton, Allan McLane. "Vibratory Therapeutics," *Medical News* February 1898, 248.

"Has Many Exhibits for Federal Jury." *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* February 7, 1912, 3.

"Health & Beauty." White Cross Vibrator Catalog. Linstrom Smith Company: Chicago, Illinois, 1911.

Herold, Justin. *A Manual of Legal Medicine: For the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine and Law*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1898.

Heywood, Ezra. *Free Speech: Report of Ezra H. Heywood's Defense Before the United States Court in Boston, April 10, 11, and 12, 1883.* Princeton: Free Speech Press, 1883.

Hirsch, Edwin. *The Power to Love*. New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1938.

Hite, Shere. *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 1981.

Hodgman, Daniel. *A pioneer in rubber: a brief history of the career of Daniel Hodgman*. Hodgman Rubber Company, 1913.

Holmes, Rand H. "Like to Get Away from It All?" IN *Harold Hedd*, no. 1. Last Gasp, 1973.

Holmes, Rand. "Police Should Be Obscene and Not Absurd," in *Harold Hedd*, no. 2. Kitchen Sink Enterprises, 1973.

"How Orificial Irritation Becomes the Predisposing Cause of All Forms of Chronic Disease." *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases,* 1, no. 5 (September 1893).

Hruby, Kathy. "Sexual Self-Help." *Amazon Quarterly*, vol 3, 2 (March 1975), 61.

"Illustrated Catalogue of the India Rubber Glove Company's Boots and Shoes." Boston: Lamkin Foster Agents,1885-1886.

"Improved Penis Reproduction," Great Western Surgical Supply Catalog, June 1969.

"India Rubber: How Produced and Used. A Vast and Important Industry." *New York Times,* January, 1, 1886.

"Ingenious 'Helps' Overcome Dealer Inertia." *Printers' Ink.* 23 January 1921: 113-116.

"Investigate- Before You Invest!!!!" *Roanoke Better Business Bureau Newsletter,* January 15, 1959.

Jay, Karla. "The Spirit is Feminist but the flesh is?" *The Lesbian Tide* vol. 4. No. 3, (October, 1974).

"John Oster Manufacturing Co. Demonstrators' Manual." December 18, 1949.

Johnson, R. Christian, "Transcript of an Interview with John Saxton Sumner," August 18, 1969.

Johnston, Alva. "Profiles: Contented Crusader: John S. Sumner." *The New Yorker* February 20, 1937, 25.

Jong, Erica. *Fear of Flying.* New York: Henry Holt, 1973.

Katz, Sue. "Smash Phallic Imperialism." *Lavender Vision,* vol 1, no. 1, (1970).

"The Kendall Case." *Commercial Advertiser*, July 3, 1873.

Kerr Barbara T. and Mirtha N. Quintaneles. “The Complexity of Desire: Conversations on Sexuality and Difference.” *Conditions* Issue 8, Spring 1982.

Kinsey, Alfred. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia and London: W.B. Saunders and Company, 1953).

Koedt, Anne, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in *Radical Feminism,* ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, 198-207. New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973.

Lancaster, Frank H. and Ernest F. Birmingham, “Bill Henry.” *Fourth Estate: A Weekly Newspaper for Publishers,* 18 December 1920, 3-4.

Lesh, Cheri. “Profile Robin Tyler: Born Again Woman.” *Lesbian Tide,* Vol. 8, Issue 2 (Sep-Oct 1978).

Letter from Cephas Brainerd to Law Offices, Stokes Building. 47 Cedar Street. October 22, 1901, 2.

Letter from E.C. Henry to Theodore Schroeder, Nov. 15, 1906.

Letter from Ida Craddock to Mr. Pentecost, Feb. 9th, 1902.

Letter from the Journal of the American Medical Association to Samuel Hopkins Adams, February 11,1915.

Letter from the Journal of the American Medical Association to Dr. J.M. Donelan December 16, 1912.

Letter from the Journal of the American Medical Association to F.R. Lawrence September 14, 1916.

Letter from Robert A Holz to E.. Foote, July 1, 1911.

Letter to Clinton Merriam January 18, 1873. Reprinted in John Milton Scudder, *On the Reproductive Organs and the Venereal.* Cincinnati: Wilstach, Baldwin & Co. Printers, 1887.

“Liberating Masturbation,” in“ Worth Noting” *The Spokeswoman*, (March 15, 1975), vol. 5, 9.

Lowry, Edith Belle and Richard Jay Lambert. *Himself: Talks With Men Concerning Himself.* Chicago: Forbes and Company, 1912.

Lyvely, Chin and Joyce Farmer, "The Fuller Bush Person,” in *Tits & Clits Comix*, no. 2. Laguna Beach, CA:Nanny Goat Productions, 1976.

Martin, Edward. *Impotence and Sexual Weakness in the Male and Female.* Detroit: George S. Davis, 1893.

Massey, Morris E. "A Marketing Analysis of Sex-Oriented Materials in a Single City," October 26, 1970.

Matthews, Joseph McDowell. "Anal Dilation," *Matthew's Medical Quarterly* 1 (1894).

McGraw Electrical Directory, New York: McGraw Publishing Co., 1909.

McJunkin Electric Supplement, September 1921 issue, Vol. IV, No. 49, cover.

"Ms. Magazine Wins Victory For All Women's Press in Library Case," editor Dr. Donna Allen. *Media Report to Women,* vol. 7. 7. (July 1, 1979).

Monell, Samuel Howard. *A System of Instruction in X-Ray Methods and Medical Uses of Light, Hot-Air, Vibration, and High-Frequency Currents.* New York: E.R. Pelton, 1902.

Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1872.

Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1875.

Names and record of persons arrested under the auspices of The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the year 1903.

"Neumo-Penis-Aid" Pacific Products Catalog, Norse Medical Supply Company, 1968.

"New Free Zone." *The Berkeley Barb* Vol. 7, no. 16, Oct. 11-18, 1968, 5.

"The New Way." *Medical Review* 27, no. 19 (May 1893).

"New York Advertisements." *Thompson's Mercantile and Professional Directory*. Baltimore: William Thompson, 1851.

"News of the Week." *The Medical Age: A Semi-Monthly Review of Medicine.* November 25, 1885.

"News of the Week." *Medical Record.* October 24, 1885. Vol. 28.

Nissen, Hartvig. *A Manual of instruction for giving Swedish movement and massage*. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Publisher, 1889.

Noyes Bros. & Cutler Catalog. St. Paul, Minn.: Noyes Bros. & Cutler, circa late 1800s.

"N.Y. World notified by Anthony Comstock to discontinue lottery advertisements; also to be notified to exclude massage, electrical and personal advertisements; also French remedies." *NY Commercial Advertiser*, circa 1900.

Oster promotional pamphlet, "Massage: An Aid to Better Health with the Oster Suspended Motor massage Instrument." John Oster Manufacturing Company: Racine, Wisconsin, 1948.

Pepper, William & Louis Starr, eds. *A System of Practical Medicine*. Philadelphia: Lea Brothers & Co., 1886.

Peterson, Frederick. "Vibratory Therapeutics." *Medical News,* 29 January, 1898.

Price List of Physicians' Supplies Manufactured by Charles Truax and Company, 5th Edition, Chicago, Illinois: 1890.

"Report of Cases." *Journal of Orificial Surgery,* 6, No. 12, 1898.

Rice, May Cushman. *Electricity in Gynecology.* Chicago: L.I. Laing and Co., 1912.

Rogers, C.E. *Secret Sins of Society.* Minneapolis, MN.: Union Publishing Company, 1881.

Safran, Clare. "Plan Talk About The New Approach to Sexual Pleasure." *Redbook.* March 1976.

Shulman, Alix Kates. "Organs and Orgasms," In *Women in a Sexist Society,* edited by V. Gornick and B. Moran. New York: Signet, 1971.

Sears Roebuck and Company. *Sears Christmas Book.* Chicago, Illinois: 1956.

Sears Roebuck and Company. *Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalogue No. 111,* Chicago, Illinois: 1902.

Sears Roebuck and Company. "Aids that Every Woman Appreciates." *Sears Roebuck and Company*, *Electrical Goods: Everything Electrical for Home, Office, Factory and Shop*. Chicago, Illinois, 1918.

Sears Roebuck and Company. "Vibrators and Medical Batteries for Electrical and Home Use," *Sears Electrical Goods Catalogue.* Chicago, Illinois, c. 1918.

Sears Roebuck and Company. *Sears Special Catalogue of Surgical Instruments and Physicians' Supplies*, Chicago, Illinois, 1902.

Simpson, W.E. *Rubber: Its Commercial and Financial Development From the Tree to Payment of Dividends Upon the Capital Invested.* New York: Wall Street Journal, 1900.

Sims, Charles Andrew Starr. *Talks on Chronic Diseases: With Special Reference to Mechanico-Therapeutical Treatment.* Kansas City: C.A.S. Sims, 1912.

Sims, J. Marion. "Cases of Vaginismus, With the Method of Treatment." *Chicago Medical Examiner,* June 1862, 3 no. 6.

Sims, James Marion. *Clinical Notes on Uterine Surgery with Special Reference to the Management of the Sterile Condition.* New York: William Wood and Co., 1867.

Sims, J. Marion *The Story of My Life.* New York: DaCapo Press, 1968.

"Some Don'ts in Orificial Work." *Journal of Orificial Surgery* 6, No. 7 (1898).

"Superiority of vulcanized caoutchouc over any other substance for the Fabrication of Bougies." *The Cincinnati Lancet and Observer,* March 1864, 7, no. 3.

"Six Caught By *Comstock*. Prominent Akron Men Charged With Violating Law Arrested, Then Released Under." *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. September 27, 1903, 13.

Snake, R. "Loving Women" review, *Big Mama Rag,* vol. 3, no. 5 (June 1975).

Starrett, Barbara. "I Dream in Female: The Metaphors of Evolution." *Amazon Quarterly,* vol. 3. No. 1, (November 1974).

The Story of a Dildoe, a Tale in Five Tableaux. London: Privately Printed, 1891.

Swartz, Mimi. "For the Woman Who Has Almost Everything." *Esquire* (July 1980).

"Thirteenth Annual Report of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. " Presented March 2, 1904. New York.

"Time and Tonics in Sexual Weakness." *The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases* 1, no. 5 (April 1893).

"To Be Destroyed When Read. Private and Confidential." Report from the Y.M.C.A. New York: Jan. 28, 1874.

"To the Gentlemen of the Drug Trade who May be Interested in The Recent Comstockian Raids." The National Defense Association, 1885.

"Tom Objects." In *The Berkeley Barb* Vol. 7, no. 17, Oct. 18-25, 1968.

Trumbull, Charles Galludet. *Anthony Comstock, Fighter, 2nd. Ed.* New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913.

Tyco Shop By Mail Catalog. Tyco Inc.: Dobbs Ferry, New York, 1953.

"Understanding the Market," *The Adult Business Mail Marketing Guide*. Washington, D.C.: RPE Publications, 1979.

"Vaginismus," *Periscope,* March 27, 1875.

Vedin, Augusta. "A Case of Acquired Artesia of the Vagina, Complicated by Pregnancy." *Medical Record* 52, no. 14 (October 2, 1897).

Whitehead, Wm R. "Cases of Strictures of the Rectum Treated by Different Methods; one of them by Electrolysis." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 64, no. 127 (July 1872).

Wood, James C. *A Text-Book of Gynecology*. Philadelphia: Boericke & Tafel, 1894.

"Women Protest Sexism on Bar Exam." *The Spokeswoman*, June 15, 1974,5.

Women's Sexuality Conference Proceedings. New York: National Organization of Women New York Chapter, 1974.

Worster, Joseph. "Cases of Vaginismus: treated after the Method of Sims, by Exsection of the Hymen and Meatus Urinarius." *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 112 (October 1868).

Movies

Annie Hall. 1977. Directed by Woody Allen. Metro Goldwyn Mayer.
Barbarella. 1968. Directed by Roger Vadim. Paramount Pictures.
Borat. 2006. Directed by Larry Charles. Twentieth Century Fox.
Bruno. 2009. Directed by Larry Charles. Universal Pictures.
Easy A. 2010. Directed by Will Gluck. Screen Gems.
Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Too Afraid to Ask. 1972. Directed by Woody Allen. Metro Goldwyn Mayer.
The Exorcist. 1973. Directed by William Friedkin. Warner Brothers.
Extreme Movie. 2008. Directed by Adam J. Epstein & Andy Jacobsen. Dimension Films.
First Nudie Musical. 1976. Directed by Mark Haggard & Bruce Kimmel. Paramount Pictures.
Ghost World. 2001. Directed by Terry Zwigoff. United Artists.
Hysteria. 2011. Directed by Tanya Wexler. Sony Pictures Classics.
Is There Sex After Death? 1971. Directed by Jeanne and Alan Abel. Image Entertainment.
Jackass Number Two. 2006. Directed by Jeff Tremaine. MTV Films.
Just Married. 2003. Directed by Shawn Levy. Twentieth Century Fox.
Lola. 2012. Directed by Eytan Harris. Eytan Harris Productions.
Made of Honor. 2008. Directed by Paul Weiland. Columbia Pictures.

Multiple Maniacs. 1970. Directed by John Waters. Newline Cinema.
Myra Breckenridge. 1970. Directed by Michael Sarne. Twentieth Century Fox.
Neighbors. 2014, Directed by Nicholas Stoller. Universal Pictures.
Not Another Teen Movie. 2001. Directed by Joel Gallen. Columbia Pictures.
Orgazmo (1997) Directed by Trey Parker. Rogue Pictures.
Passion and Power: The Technology of Orgasm. 2007. Directed by Emiko Omori and Wendy Slick. Wabi Sabi Productions.
Sleeper. 1972. Directed by Woody Allen. Metro Goldwyn Mayer.
That Awkward Moment. 2014. Directed by Tom Gormican. Focus Features.
WR: Mysteries of the Organism. 1971. Directed by Dušan Makavejev.

TV Shows

2 Broke Girls. 2011-present. Warner Brothers Television.
The Comeback. 2005 & 2014. Home Box Office Incorporated.
Curb Your Enthusiasm. 2000-2011. Home Box Office Incorporated.
How I Met Your Mother. 2005-2014. Bays & Thomas Productions.
Louie. 2010-Present. 3 Arts Entertainment.
The Office (U.S.). 2005-2013. Deedle-Dee Productions.
Sex and the City. 1998-2004. Darren Star Productions.
Weeds. 2005-2012. Lionsgate television.

Sources of Advertisements Discussed in the Dissertation

Medical Journals

American Druggist, 1885
*Chicago Medical Examiner,*1869
The Independent, 1886.
The New Way: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Rational Treatment of Chronic Diseases, 1893.
The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health, 1894

Magazines

*Amazing Stories,*1948
Big Mama Rag: a Feminist News Journal, 1976, 1977
*Christian Observer,*1909
Chrysalis, 1977
Go Fuck Yourself, rev. ed., circa 2000.
Health, 1903, 1908, 1909, 1912
Home Journal, 1855
The Independent, 1914
Ms., 1974, 1976, 1977
Lesbian Tide, 1977
New Woman's Times, 1976-1977, 1979
Popular Mechanics, 1909-1916

Youth's Companion, 1918

Newspapers
Charleston Daily News. Charleston, South Carolina, 1865
The Chicago Daily Tribune. Chicago, Illinois, 1900-1930
The Des Moines News, Des Moines, Iowa, 1912
The Evening Standard. Ogden, Utah, 1913.
The Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, California, 1900-1930
The New York Times. New York, New York, 1900-1930.
New York Tribune. New York, New York, 1913
The National Police Gazette. New York, New York, 1878, 1883-1889, 1896, 1924
Salt Lake City Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah, 1913

Government Documents

Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use. (1873). 17 Stat. 599.

Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *Final Report.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970.

Complaint from viewer in Maple Valley, WA, about "Trojan Triphoria" ad that aired December 31, 2010 on a *Saturday Night Live* episode that was shown on VH1. FCC/Enforcement Bureau, IHD-Investigation and Hearings. Informal complaints received by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding the television show 'Saturday Night Live,' 2008-2012.

Complaint from viewer in Old Tappan NJ 07675 about *@ Broke Girls* that aired November 12, 2012 on CBS. Complaint from viewer in Jacksonville, FL NJ about *2 Broke Girls* that aired November 11, 2012 on CBS. Informal complaints received by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding the television show '2 Broke Girls,' 2011-2013, Released Date December 5, 2013.

Documents of the Senate of the State of New-York Sixty-Sixth Session 1843, Vol. III, From No. 71 to 122 Inclusive. Albany, NY: E. Mack Printer to the Senate, 1843.

"Fake Medical Devices: An FDA Report." Washington D.C.: October 1963. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Food and Drug Administration, Washington, D.C.

Special Report: U.S. Mail, Fiscal Year 1963. Post Office Department. Washington, D.C.: 1963.

Transactions of the American Institute of the City of New York For the Year 1849. Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons & Co., Public Printers, 1850.

Transactions of the American Institute of the City of New York For the Year 1850. Albany, NY: Charles Van Benthuysen Printer to the Legislature, 1851.

"The Vacuum Appliance Company," Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General for the Post Office Department, 17 March 1905, and "Vacuum Medical Company," Memorandum from Assistant Attorney General, 23 September 1905, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1789-2011, Office of Post and Office of Solicitor.

Secondary Sources

Allen, Hugh. *The House of Goodyear,* 3rd ed. Akron, Ohio: The Superior Printing and Lithography Company, 1937.

Allyn, David. *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History.* New York: Little Brown and Company, 2000.

Arnott, Stephen. *Sex: A User's Guide*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2002.

Arondekar, Anjali. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Babcock, Glenn D. *History of the United States Rubber Company: A Case Study in Corporate Management.* Bloomington, Ind.: The Foundation for the School of Business: Indiana University, 1966.

Bailey, Martha. " 'Mommas Got the Pill': How Anthony Comstock and *Griswold v. Connecticut* Shaped U.S. Childbearing." *American Economic Review* 100, no. 1 (2010): 98-129.

Bailey, Beth. *Sex in the Heartland.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Baldasty, Gerald J. *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.

Bennett, D.R.M. *Anthony Comstock: His Career of Cruelty and Crime*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971.

Bennett, Paula "'Pomegranate-Flowers': The Phantasmic Productions of Late-Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Women Poets." In *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism*, ed. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario II. New York: Routledge, 1995: 189-213.

Bingham, A. Walker. *The Snake Oil Syndrome: Patent Medicine Advertising.* Hanover, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1994.

Blackford, Mansel G. and K. Austin Kerr. *BFGoodrich: Tradition and Transformation, 1870-1895.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996.

Blank, Joani. *Good Vibrations: The New Complete Guide to Vibrators*. San Francisco: Down There Press, 2000.

Boyer, Paul. *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America From the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Bronstein, Carolyn. *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Broun, Heywood and Margaret Leech. *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord*. New York, 1927.

Bullough, Vern L. *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.

Bullough, Vern L. "Technology for the Prevention of 'les maladies produites par la masturbation.'" *Technology and Culture* 28, no. 4 (1987): 828-32.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Clement, Elizabeth. *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Collier, Aine. *The Humble Little Condom: A History.* Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007.

Comella, Lynn. "Selling Sexual Liberation: Women-Owned Sex Toy Stores and Business of Sexual Change." PhD diss., University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2004.

Connell, Erin and Alan Hunt. "Sexual ideology and sexual physiology in the discourses of sex advice literature." *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 15, no.1 (Spring 2006): 23-45.

Connelly, Mark Thomas. *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Coopersmith, Jonathan. "Pornography, Technology, and Progress." *Icon: Journal of the International Committee for the History of Technology* 4 (January 1998): 94-125.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology." In *The Social Construction of Technological*

Systems. New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology, ed. Thomas P. Hughes, Trevor J. Pinch, and Wiebe E. Bijker. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *A Social History of American Technology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *More Work For Mother*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Cryle, Peter. "Vaginismus: A Franco-American Story." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 67, no. 1 (2012).

Daly, Mary. *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

Danky, James and Dennis Kitchen, eds. *Underground Classics*. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2009.

Darby, Robert. " Review Essay: A Post-Modernist Theory of Wanking: Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation. By Thomas Laqueur. " *Journal of Social History* 38, no.1, 2004.

Davis, Audrey B. "American Medicine in the Gilded Age: The First Technological Era." *Annals of Science,* 47, no. 2 (1990).

Day, Tanis. "Capitol-Labor Substitution in the Home." *Technology and Culture* 33, No. 2 (April 1992): 302-327.

D'Emilio, John and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America.* New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

Dennis, Donna. *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and its Prosecution in 19th-century New York.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Dodson, Betty. "Having Sex with Machines: The Return of the Electric Vibrator/" Dodson and Ross, June 8, 2010, http://dodsonandross.com/blogs/betty-dodson/2010/06/having-sex-machines-return-electric-vibrator

Dodson, Betty. *My Romantic Love Wars.* New York: Betty Dodson, 2010.

Downs, Donald. *The New Politics of Pornography.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Dugdale, Anni. "Intrauterine Contraceptive Devices, Situated Knowledges, and the Making of Women's Bodies." *Australian Feminist Studies,* (2000) 15, no. 32: 165 - 176.

Duggan, Lisa, "Review Essay From Instinct to Politics: Writing the History of Sexuality

in the U.S." *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no.1 (1990): 95-109.

Duggan, Lisa and Nan Hunter. *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture,* 10th ann. ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Duffin, Jacalyn. *History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Echols, Alice. *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Edgerton, David. "From Innovation to Use: Ten Eclectic Theses on the Historiography of Technology." *History & Technology* 16, no. 2 (1999):111-136.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth L. *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Engelhardt Jr, H. Tristram. "The Disease of Masturbation: Values and Concepts of the Disease." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48, (Summer 1974): 234-48.

Enke, Anne. *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Ericksen, Julia A. *Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999

Evan, William and Bret Hays. "Dual-Use Technology in the Context of the Non-Proliferation Regime." *History and Technology* 22, no. 1 (August 2006): 105-113.

Ewen, Stewart and Elizabeth. *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of Urban Consciousness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Ferla, Ruth. "Good Vibrations, Upscale Division." *New York Times*. Oct 03, 2004, ST13.

Findlay, Heather. "Freud's "Fetishism" and the Lesbian Dildo Debates." *Feminist Studies* 18, No. 3, *The Lesbian Issue* (Autumn, 1992), 563-579.

Firestone Jr., Harvey S. *The Romance and Drama of the Rubber Industry.* Firestone Tire and Rubber Company: 1932.

Fleischer, Doris. *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1.* Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Fox, Stephen. *The Mirror Makers*. Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997.

Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Freedman, Estelle and John D'Emilio, "Problems Encountered in Writing the History of Sexuality: Sources, Theory and Interpretation." *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no. 4 (1990).

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1961.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.

Galison, Peter, "The ontology of the enemy Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision." *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 228-266.

Gamson, Joshua. "Rubber Wars: Struggles Over the Condom in the United States." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, No. 2 (Oct. 1990), 262-282.

Gerhard, Jane. *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920-1982.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Gijswijt-Hofstra, Marijke and Roy Porter, eds. *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*. Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 2001.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Goldstein, Carolyn M. "From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920-1940." *Technology and Culture* 38, no. 1(1997): 121-152.

Griffith, R. Marie "The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey." *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (Sep. 2008), 349-377.

Groneman, Carol*, Nymphomania*: *A History.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2000.

Hale Jr, Nathan G. *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1971*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Hall, Lesley A. "It Was Affecting the Medical Profession: The History of Masturbatory Insanity Revisited." *Paedogogica Historica* 39, no. 6 (June 2003): 685-699.

Hall, Stuart , "Encoding, Decoding," (1973) in *The Cultural Studies Reader,* ed. Simon

During. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Halperin, David M. *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Socialist Review* 80 (1985).

Harris, Seale. *Woman's Surgeon: The Life Story of J. Marion Sims* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950.

Heindry, John. *What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Heinemann, Elizabeth .*Before Porn Was Legal*: *The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Henkin, David. *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Herbenick, Debby & Vanessa Schick. *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide to the Vagina and Vulva*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.

Herbenick, Debra and Michael Reece, et al, "Women's Vibrator Use in Sexual Partnerships: Results From a Nationally Representative Survey in the United States." *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy,* 36 (2010):49-65.

Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform.* New York: Vintage Books, 1955.

Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Knopf, 2002.

Howard, Hillary. "Vibrators Carry the Conversation." *New York Times.* April 20, 2011.

Hughes, Thomas. *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm.* New York: Viking, 1989.

Hughes, Thomas. *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993.

Jensen, Casper Bruun. "Developing/development cyborgs." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (special issue on "Cyborg Embodiment: Affect, Agency and Responsibility") 7 no. 3 (2008): 375-385.

Johns, Adrian. *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Johnson, Ericka, "Surgical Simulators and Simulated Surgeons: Reconstituting Medical Practice and Practitioners in Simulations." *Social Studies of Science* 37, no. 4 (August 2007), 585-608.

Johnson, Peter. "Pornography Drives Technology: Why Not to Censor the Internet." In *Pornography: Private Right or Public* Menace, edited by Robert M. Baird & Stuart E. Rosenbaum, 80-93. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998.

Jones, James. *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Juffer, Jane. *At Home With Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life.* New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Kelly, Edward "A New Image for the Naughty Dildo?" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1974): 804-809.

Kendrick, Walter, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Kirk, Andrew. "Machines of Loving Grace: Technology, Environmentalism and the Counterculture." In *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s,* eds. Peter Braunstein and William Michael Doyle. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Kline, Ronald R. *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Kline, Wendy. *Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's Health in the Second Wave. C*hicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Laipson, Peter, **"'**Kiss without Shame, for She Desires It': Sexual Foreplay in American Marital Advice Literature, 1900-1925." *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 3 (Spring, 1996): 507-525.

Laird, Pamela. *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

LaMay, Craig. "America's Censor: Anthony Comstock and Free Speech." *Communications and the Law* 19, no.3 (Sept. 1997).

Laqueur, Thomas. *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. New York: Zone Books, 2003.

Laura, Alison Neumer. "In the Drugstore Aisle: Pleasure Products: Sex Toys for Women

Finding More Retail Shelf Space." *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, December 21, 2005.

Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America.* New York: Basic Books, 1994.

Lerner, Max. *America as a Civilization: Life and Thought in the United States Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

Liebhafsky, Herman. *Silicones Under the Monogram: A Story of Industrial Research*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978.

Lord, Alexandra M. *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government's Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Love, Steve and David Giffels. *Wheels of Fortune: The Story of Rubber in Akron*. Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 1999.

Lunbeck, Elizabeth. "Hysteria: the Revolt of the 'Good Girl." In Elizabeth Reis ed. *American Sexual Histories.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001.

Maerch, Rona. "Profile Joani Blank: A Sexual Aide: Revolutionary Store Good Vibrations Brought Sex Toys to the Masses." *San Francisco Chronicle,* February 14, 2003.

Maier, Thomas. *Masters of Sex: The Life and Times of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the Couple Who Taught America How to Love*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Marcus, Stephen. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England.* New York: Basic Books, 1964.

Maines, Rachel P. *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Martin, Michelle. "The Culture of the Telephone." In *Sex/Machine : Readings in Culture, Gender, and Technology*, ed. Patricia D. Hopkins. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Marvin, Carolyn. *When Old Technologies were New: Thinking about electric Communication in the late Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

McGaw, Judy. "No Passive Victims; No Separate Spheres: A Feminist Perspective on Technology's History." In *In Context: History and the History of Technology—Essays in Honor of Mel Kranzenberg*, edited by Stephen Cutliffe and Robert W. Post Bethleham, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1988.

McGregor, Deborah Kuhn. *Sexual Surgery and the Origins of Gynecology: J. Marion Sims, His Hospital, and His Patients.* New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989.

McLaren, Angus, *Impotence: A Cultural History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

McLaren, Angus. *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

McNair, Brian. *Striptease Culture: sex, media and the deomcratisation of desire.* London: Routledge, 2002.

Meikle, Jeffrey. *American Plastic: A Cultural History.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997..

Monagle, Katie. "All About Eve's Garden." *Ms*. vol. 6, no. 3 (November 1995).

Moore, Lisa Jean. " 'It's like you use pots and pans to cook. It's the tool': The Technologies of Safer Sex." *Science, Technology and Human Values* (1997) 22(4):434-471.

Mott, Frank Luther. *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850,* vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930.

Morus, Iwan Rhys. "Bodily Disciplines and Disciplined Bodies: Instruments, Skills and Victorian Electrotherapeutics." *Social History of Medicine* 19, no. 2 (2006): 241-59.

Murphy, Michelle. "Immodest Witnessing: The Epistemology of Vaginal Self-Examination in the U.S. Feminist Self-Help Movement." *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

Nord, David. *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Nye, David. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.

Oldenziel, Ruth and Karin Zachmann. *Cold War Kitchen.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

Oldenziel, Ruth Adri Albert de la Bruhèze, and Onno de Wit," Europe's Mediation Junction: Technology and Consumer Society in the 20th Century." *History and Technology* 21 (2005): 107-139.

O'Reilly, Maurice. *The Goodyear Story.* Elmsford NY: Benjamin Company, 1983.

O'Toole, Laurence. *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire.* London: Serpent's

Tail, 1999.

Padgett, Matt. *Make Your Own Sex Toys.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007.

Pearsall, Ronald. *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.

Peña, Carolyn Thomas de la. *The Body Electric How Strange Machines Built the Modern American*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

Phillips, Michael. "What Small Business Experience Teaches Us About Economic Theory." In Paul Elkins, *The Living Economy: A New Economics in the Making*. New York: Routledge, 1986.

Pinch, Trevor J. and Wiebe B. Bijker. "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other." *Social Studies of Science* 14, No. 3, (Aug. 1984): 399-341.

Ponce de Leon, Charles. *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America.* Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Rabban, David M. *Free Speech In Its Forgotten Years*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Reichert, Tom. *The Erotic History of Advertising.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003.

Rodriguez, Sarah W. "Rethinking the history of female circumcision and clitoridectomy: American medicine and female sexuality in the late nineteenth century." *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences* 63, no. 3 (2008): 323-47.

Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America.* New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

Rosewarne, Lauren. *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture.* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011.

Savitt, Todd L. "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South. " *The Journal of Southern History* 48 (August 1982).

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Schlosser, Eric. *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Schudson, Michael. *Discovering the News, A Social History of American Newspapers.* New York: Basic Books, 1978.

Sharon, Jayson. "Many chain stores now add a toy aisle for adults." *USA Today*, May 31, 2012.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1890*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Silverman, Milton. "The Scientists Goofiest Discovery." *Saturday Evening Post*. February 26, 1955.

Sivulka, Juliann. *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*: *A Cultural History of American Advertising.* Rev. ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012.

Skinner, Marilyn, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture,* 2nd Ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2014.

Slade, Joseph W. "Eroticism and technological regression: The stag film." *History & Technology* 22, no. 1 (2006): 27-52.

Staudenmaier, John and Pamela Walker Lurito Laird. "Advertising History: A Survey of Recent Literature." *Technology and Culture,* 30, No.4, (October 1989): 1031-36.

Stengers, Jean and Anne Van Neck. *Masturbation: The History of a Great Terror*. Translated by Kathryn Hoffmann. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Stephens, Elizabeth, "Tact/ility in Nineteenth-Century Medical Photographs and Models." In *Bodies, Sex, and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan. Houndsmills, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011., 87-101.

Strasser, Susan. *Never Done: A History of American Housework.* Pantheon Books: New York, 1982.

Strossen, Nadine. *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Taylor, Emma and Lorelei Sharkey. *Em and Lo's Sex Toy: An A-Z Guide to Bedside Accessories.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006.

Taylor, Timothy. *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture*. New York: Bantam, 1996.

Thelen, David P. "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Sep., 1969): 323-341.

Tone, Andrea, "Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s." In *American Sexual Histories,* ed. Elizabeth Reis. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Tone, Andrea. *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.

Tone, Andrea. "Making room for rubbers: Gender, technology, and birth control before the pill." *History and Technology: An International Journal* 18, no. 1 (September 2002): 51-76.

Trumbull, Charles Galludet. *Anthony Comstock, Fighter, 2nd. Ed.* New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913.

Tully, John. *Devil's Milk: A Social History of Rubber.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011.

Tunc, Tanfer Emin "Talking Sex: Deciphering Dialogues of American Female Sexuality in the Mosher Survey, 1892-1920," *Journal of Women's History* 22 no.1 (2010).

Vaughn, Stephen. *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Vostral, Sherra. *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

Wacjman, Judy. *Technofeminism.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

Wailoo, Keith. *Drawing Blood: Technology and Disease Identity in Twentieth-Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Walters, Ronald. *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974.

Watkins, Elizabeth. *On The Pill: A Social History of Contraceptives: 1950-1970.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Wiebe, Robert. *The Search for Order 1877-1920.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

Williams, Dell and Lynn Vannucci. *Revolution in the Garden: Memoirs of the Gardenkeeper.* Silver Back Books, 2010.

Wolf, Howard & Ralph. *Rubber*: *A Story of Glory and Greed.* New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936.

Wortham, Jenna. “Apple Bans Some Apps for Sex-Tinged Content.” *New York Times,* February 22, 2010.

Wypijewski, JoAnn. “Playing Doctor,” *The Nation,* June 18, 2012.