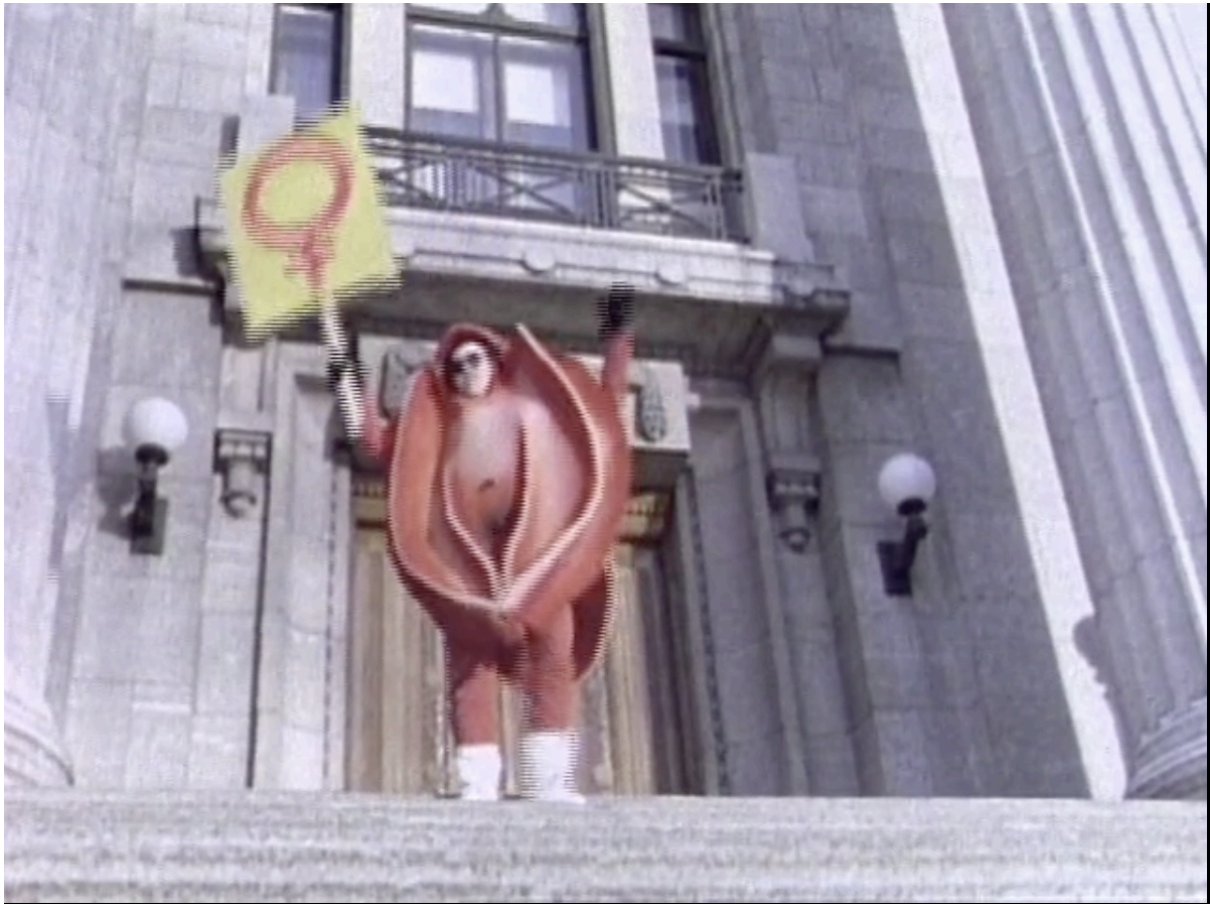


Beyond the Narrative: Experimental Approaches to Lesbian “Sex Talk” (1977-1997)

Curatorial essay by Cait McKinney and Hazel Meyer



Still image from *We're Talking Vulva*, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, 1990, Distributed by CFMDC, Video Pool Media Arts Centre and Winnipeg Film Group.

In *Jill Johnston: October 1975* (1977), directors Lydia Wazana and Kay Armatage offer a portrait of a U.S.- based lesbian-feminist icon's trip to Toronto for a speaking tour. Johnston is promoting her new book project, *Mother Bound*, reading from what she describes to one audience as a single paragraph that goes on for 300 pages about “the archival sense of mother.” Johnston is most famous for writing another book, *Lesbian Nation* (1973)—which is why so many people came out to see her in Toronto, and why Wazana and Armatage set out to make this film. *Lesbian Nation* argues for a lesbian separatist politics where all women embrace their inner lesbian and break from relationships with men and patriarchy. Johnston was a controversial figure, often polemic, and her combativeness is on full display at moments in the film. For example, she berates a man attending one of her readings for bringing a “hostile male energy” into the room, shouting at him into her microphone to leave as he tries to defend his legitimate interest in hearing her speak.

In many ways, Johnston is all vibes, and this is one way to engage with her version of feminism from the present, despite its unapologetic whiteness and essential ideas about womanhood taken up as transphobia then and now. Gender studies scholar Kyla Wazana

Tompkins, Lydia's daughter, has written of the film that while she doesn't "agree with much that Johnston has to say politically...,"

"I admire the sound and image of Johnston's anger as an artifact of a time when lesbian presence—ugly, monstrous, furious, righteous—had a new currency or traction in the world by the simple fact that it had never been made visible in that way before"

(Wazana Tompkins 2019, 150).

Wazana and Armatage's documentary is shot in verité style, following Johnston and her much younger girlfriend Elli through the streets of Toronto, on the streetcar, to lecture halls and art galleries, living rooms, and to lesbian potlucks and dance parties. They drink wine, eat cheese, smoke cigarettes, smile saccharinely at each other, and are constantly cuddling and kissing, in that endearing but also annoying way lesbians do early in relationships (we write from experience). They are, in other words, relationing, with Wazana and Armatage as witness, and this is as much the subject of the film as Johnston's writing and persona, which matters if you consider the hostility against lesbian sexuality in the 1970s. There are few declarations here along the lines of "I am a lesbian," but what the film primarily offers is an intimate vision of lesbian sociality entwined with sexuality: potlucks, politics, and a newish love affair.



Still image from *Jill Johnston: October 1975* (Kay Armatage & Lydia Wazana, 1977)

The film represents the earliest example in this selection we have curated from Archive/Counter Archive and the CFMDC's recently digitized collection of rare queer Canadian films from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. The five selected films each take up experimental approaches to lesbian sex talk, by which we mean, how lesbian politics emerge through our attempts to communicate with others about sex. The context for the works selected here was a broader emerging queer experimental film practice in Canada that responded to homophobia not just in the context of equal rights or everyday life, but in the arts too. Provincial Censor Boards in Canada attacked queer filmmakers in the 1980s, banning certain films deemed "indecent" or "obscene" from being screened in public (Sirove 2019). Artist-run centres such as CFMDC responded with organized campaigns against censorship. This included protest screenings, but also ongoing, active support for queer filmmakers and their work, out of which CFMDC's rich collection grew (Takahashi 2019).

While it's easy to locate this kind of censorship in the past, it finds contemporary manifestations in practices such as shadow-banning queer and trans creators and sex workers on social media platforms. Returning to the ways queer filmmakers responded to these conditions of erasure and censorship with critical investigations of sex talk might offer formal and conceptual models for responding to these censorious conditions today. Following film scholar Tess Takahashi, we might take cues from how "the experimental filmmakers in CFMDC's collection articulated issues about sexuality that came from their own lived experience in a cultural context in which people were actively thinking about gender, sexuality, and the politics of representation" (Takahashi 2019).

Michelle Mohabeer's *Exposure* (1990) documents a conversation between two Toronto-based lesbians in their 30s: Mona Oikawa, who is Japanese, and Leleti Tamu, who is Afro-Caribbean. They sit in matching upholstered armchairs, facing each other deep in thoughtful, focused conversation. It feels like they don't know each other well, or even at all, but the dialogue is intimate and open. Their talk is interspersed with voice over and images: difficult photographs of Japanese internment are balanced alongside joyful depictions of Black feminist literature and the Asian Lesbians of Toronto marching at Pride. Oikawa and Tamu reflect on what they have in common as lesbians of colour—"we share colonization, imperialism, appropriation, oppression"—and talk through their shared desire to connect racism and homophobia as "part of the same struggle." They also express their difference from each other, marking the legacies of internment and slavery as intertwined, yet distinct.



Still image from "Exposure", Michelle Mohabeer, 1990, CFMDC

Here, sex talk takes on the politics of what Black lesbian feminist theorist Audre Lorde (who is also quoted in the film's epigraph) calls communicating across difference. Lorde writes,

“Now we must recognize differences among women who are equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other's difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles” (Lorde 2007 [1984], 122).

Taking up this call, *Exposure* explores how sex talk can imagine lesbian identity and experience as a portal to broader coalitional work, from within the intimate space of a living room conversation.

Where Mohabeer portrays a careful conversation seeking deep understanding between lesbians, Midi Onodera follows the disjunctures, unspoken rules, and awkward moments that are also fundamental to sex talk. *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* (1985) moves through three vignettes, each presented as two channels. The first depicts two women who are friends (one played by Onodera) negotiating the possibility of casual sex with each other for the first time. Queer women are known for “processing” a lot about relationships, which is partly a practice of care. Their slow, shy conversation replaces filmic attention to actual sex with a drawn-out conversation about what that sex might mean. These women sit across from each other at a table in a Japanese restaurant. The split between the two channels happens in the middle of the table

and is deliberately a bit imperfect. Parallax is a term from physics that describes how the position of an object appears to change based on the observer's line of sight.

Drawing on this metaphor, Onodera formally marks the persistent gap between two people communicating about and through sex. This disjuncture in angle continues in the second vignette, a single shot from above of two men at a university hooking up across two bathroom stalls joined by a glory hole. The non-verbal choreography of cruising stands in contrast to the wrought lesbian sex talk it follows. In the final vignette, a straight guy calls a phone sex hotline and tries to get off while chatting with the operator, who paints her nails distractedly and tells him whatever he wants to hear. This is the least authentic of the three interactions in the film and also the most mediated: the two channels separated not just by a channel split, but by the distance a telephone call creates. Heterosexuality is deeply alienating when set against the two vignettes it follows.



Still image from *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)*, Miki Onodera, 1985, CFMDC

Siobhan Devine's *Breakfast with Gus* (1997) takes lesbian sex talk into a more every day, domestic register. This entire film is shot from the perspective of a lesbian couple's cat Gus, whose point of view is reproduced using a steady-cam held low to the ground. Gus wants his breakfast, but Julie and April are pre-occupied because Julie's brother Tom, visiting town and purportedly straight, brought a man home the previous night. While going through their morning routine, Julie and April whisper about what's going on with Tom—is he gay or are they friends? Is he being "safe?" Gus, who is also the camera, mostly looks back and forth from his food bowl to Julie and April's legs as they flit about the apartment, the audio become less audible as the humans move further from the cat. The film touches on the banality of queer intimacy triangulated through a cat's point of view, which takes on specific resonances within the context of the lesbian cat lady stereotype. Here sex talk is something you do in between making coffee and getting out the door on time for work.

Moving from the home to the context of education, Shawna Dempsey's *We're Talking Vulva* (1990) plays with one of the most transformative ways lesbian sex talk was deployed in the 1980s and 90s: for sex education that empowered women about their pleasure. Dempsey stars in this music video as Vulva, dressed head-to-toe in an anatomically correct latex suit. The film is funny and over-the-top, but also shares accurate information about how the different parts of the vulva might be used for pleasure, including through masturbation or with other women.

Watching from the present, this turn to particular anatomy as essential to women's autonomy and pleasure unintentionally evokes contemporary transphobic discourses. For the record, lots of people who are not women have vulvas, and lots of people who are women do not. But sitting with the historical specificity of this work shows how queer filmmakers took up the wider practices of lesbian-led, sex-positive, and community-based education about pleasure: here sex talk builds comfort naming, exploring, and communicating about one's body (Comella 2017).

Across these five films from CFMDC's larger queer collection, sex talk takes on many forms, from a technique for communicating across experiences of racialization toward social justice, to an everyday, low-key practice in the home before breakfast is made. Wherever it happens, sex talk responds to conditions of marginalization lesbians experienced not just in society, but also in the wider world of experimental queer film and video from the 1970s through the 1990s, which was most often made by gay men to represent their experience. For these filmmakers, listening to sex talk is a portal into the politics of lesbian life across these decades, in which sexuality and desire informed not just intimate relationships, but political imaginaries as well.