



# SEX ISSUE

1	Editorial	54	Oh Yes Come In	Batya Weinbaum	
1	Typical Week and a Half	Anonymous	54	True Life Novelette	Barbara DeGenevieve
2	The Dilemma of the One Who Wants Both and Neither . . .	Su Friedrich	55	A Father's Influence on the Sexuality of a Young Woman	Mary Winston
3	The Mother-Daughter Relationship and Sexual Ambivalence	Helle Thorning	57	Editorial	
3,4	Ann's Dream I and II	Mary Clare Powell	58	What We're Rollin Around in Bed With	Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga
5	The Book of Love . . .	Vanalyne Green	63	A Herstorical Look at Some Aspects of Black Sexuality	Sylvia Witts Vitale
7	Anatomies and Destinies (Fragments)	Nancy Huston	66	Variety Is the Spice of Life	Muriel Dimen
8	Vini	Summer Brenner	66	SSSexuality	Diane Sipprelle
9	The Babyman	Sondra Segal	67	Odalisque	Lyn Hughes
9	Post-Partum Document	Mary Kelly	68	Photo	Carol Harmel
10	Interviews with Five Faghgging Women	Camilla Decarnin	70	The Kiss	Fran Winant
15	intro & 10 takes	hattie gossett	71	Sexual Imperialism	Rekha Basu
19	yo daddy!—an 80s version of the dozens	hattie gossett	72	Photos	Doranne Jacobson
19	Photos	Diane Meyers	74	I Hear Voices But See No Faces	Vickie M. Mays
20	simple truths	corbett with help from the criplets	77	I Met a Woman	Alesia Kunz
20	Study for a Book of Lesbian Erotic Images	Tee Corinne	80	Lust Is Just a Four-Letter Word	J. Lee Lehman
21	Butch-Fem Relationships	Joan Nestle	81	Lovenotes II and IV	Janet Ruth Heller
25	Impersonals		82	Making Art/Making Love	Sandra De Sando
25	Editorial		85	Confessions of a Quiltist	Radka Donnell
26	The Celibacy Letters	Sandra M. Whisler	87	Counterpoint	Leslie Simon
29	Editorial		87	Leg over Cactus	Linda Troeller
29	Susan and Nancy	Nancy Fried	88	Narcissism, Feminism, and Video Art	Micki McGee
29	Photo	Kay Kenny	92	Editorial	
30	Feminism and Sadomasochism	Pat Califia	92	Perfect	Barbara Kruger
35	Jersey Shore Women's Wrestling		92	News Flash: People Organize to Protest Recent NOW Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights	
36	Venus	Seph Weene	94	Burnout	Laura Sky Brown
38	Stripper	Coreen Simpson	94	Editorial	
39	Editorial				
40	The Male Nude in Women's Art	Eunice Golden			
43	A Sense of Touch	Harmony Hammond			
47	Island Cabin	Irare Sabásu			
47	Gently Stalking Solitude	Betye Saar			
48	Pornography and Pleasure	Paula Webster			
48	Tits & Clits Comix	Cory			
51	Purity pink and everything neat	Glenda Hydler			
52	Mustang Ranch	Sandi Fellman			

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# EDITORIAL

"Sexuality" is the title of this issue. It has taken us almost two years to produce, and along the way there have been many disagreements and difficulties, both intellectual and interpersonal. Most of these problems, we believe, can be traced to one central issue which remained implicit for most of the two years — what is the meaning of the word "sexuality?" As individuals, we not only included different phenomena under the term, but we also approached the topic with varied theoretical and practical frameworks. Most important, the specific aspects of sexuality on which we wanted this issue of *Heresies* to focus did not always overlap.

If there can be said to have been a majority interest in the collective, it was in examining that aspect of sexuality which might be called "desire." Where do our desires come from? How do they manifest themselves in their infinite variations? And what, if anything, do they tell us about what it means to be a woman? The magazine

we have produced reflects that majority view.

The question of desire is a highly personal one, although it must be contextualized within a larger social and theoretical framework. Many of the articles do speak to this. Yet any inquiry into desire raises the question: Of what concern are issues of erotic desire, sexual satisfaction, and pleasure to women who, for economic or social reasons, must allow men access to their bodies in exchange for food, shelter, and, indeed, staying alive? The question of relevance of definitions has probably been the most painful source of conflict within our collective.

Additional sources of conflict about the meaning of "sexuality" included whether or not we were slanting the perspective of the issue too much in the direction of "negative" aspects of sexuality, and what "negative" meant in regard to sexuality. We debated whether or not reproductive issues (menstruation, contraception, abortion, sterili-

zation, pregnancy, and childbirth) were *essential* to any discussion purporting to deal with female sexuality.

As is probably true of any group effort, none of us feels that this is the magazine we would have produced if we had the individual power to make the decisions. Some of us, however, are more satisfied with the final product than others. Our lack of consensus led to our decision to have a number of editorial statements throughout the magazine. Each was written by one or two of us, but all of them reflect different facets of the complex task of analyzing the nature of women's sexuality.

Just as we have chosen, in the end, to retain our separate voices, most of us believe it is neither possible nor desirable to try to speak to all women about all things in 96 pages. We do hope, though, that this issue will stimulate you in all senses of that word, and arouse your desire to inquire into the meaning of sexuality for yourself and for feminism.

**The Sexuality Issue Collective:** Hannah Alderfer, Sandra De Sando, Beth Jaker, Kay Kenny, Suzanne Kessler, Wendy McKenna, Marybeth Nelson, Effie M. Serlis, Sylvia Witts Vitale, Paula Webster, Leanna Wolfe

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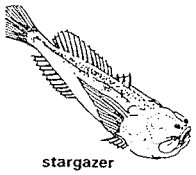
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**OPEN MEETING**  
Friday, June 12 at 8 P.M.  
Franklin Furnace  
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New York City

## Typical Week and a Half

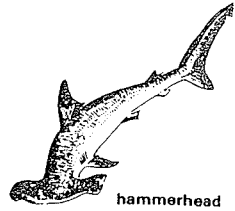
- Mon.** Fantasized fucking a woman with a penis and not letting her use her penis on me. No sex today.
- Tues.** Dressed in jockey shorts and a long white dress. Looked for a woman or a man dressed as a woman.
- Wed.** Made love to a man with a vagina while I fantasized that I was dressed as a man making love to a woman.
- Thurs.** Got fucked by a man and loved it. No fantasy.
- Fri.** Got eaten by a woman and loved it. No fantasy.
- Sat.** Played with myself. Fantasized that I was a woman playing with herself.
- Sun.** A man, pretending to be a woman, let me eat him. I fantasized that he was a woman pretending to be a man.
- Mon.** While being fucked by a man, I pretended I was fucking him. One of us came.
- Tues.** A woman made love to me. After, she told me that she was a man and hated queers. She never undressed.
- Wed.** Went looking for a man to fuck me, but changed my mind and went home with someone dressed in pants.
- Thurs.** Two people picked me up. One had a penis; the other never undressed. I was satisfied by both.
- Fri.** Filled out a sex questionnaire.

**Anonymous**



stargazer

# THE DILEMMA OF THE ONE WHO WANTS BOTH AND NEITHER But Who Would Prefer To Get On With Her Work Instead Of Being Preoccupied With Whether Anyone Will Ever make love to her right



hammerhead

Su Friedrich

Without reference to Literature or History, I want to tell some stories and give some historical background. In the beginning there is myself. And words, given to me by others. And bodies and minds of others which seem to fit my imagination. I consider whether I can name them lover. The desire for one—a woman—will make me burn in hell. The desire for the other—a man—is not desire. The one whom I desire does not desire me. The one whom I tell myself to desire desires me passionately.

Neither pleases me. Both invade me with longing. Both are the only ones I would depend on, although both seem to guarantee disappointment. Do I relish suffering, or is this my determination to make of something what it isn't?

The one whom I desire to delight responds to being delighted: she is delighted. The one whom I can delight is responsive: he delights himself. I can move over and through her body with care and passion, and she agrees but cannot do the same. I lie in wait; my desire smolders; active reverts to passive; I can do but I am not done to. He can move through my body without touching me; I can be done to without having done anything. Still I lie in wait, having little desire to act upon him but despising my passiveness. My desire cools.

This clitoris cannot demand attention, it can only expect it. I want to direct my own pleasure. I have no patience left with lying back and receiving clumsy embraces. Depending on the other's understanding of my desires provokes rage, helplessness, and anxiety. His pleasure (of me, with me) would reach fruition without my ever having to do anything to him. I am not the active ingredient, though I could be if I cared to be. Her pleasure is in being done to by me as I know best—and I know how—and I know because I know what can reach the deepest part of me when I lie back and let myself be done to by one who knows.

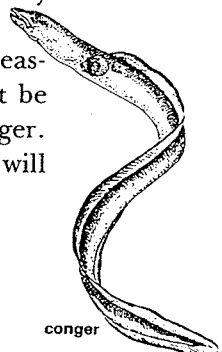
I am not averse to being pleased by another, but it isn't enough to feel that the other might be convinced of the particularities of my desire. The rage and anxiety remain. I cannot always depend on the good intentions of the other. Too often they fall asleep, muttering reassurances to me. Next time. He convinces me to let him take. She convinces me to give to her. I have agreed to this collusion.

I resist because I cannot dictate my own rhythms. I will not forcibly please myself at the other's expense. If they are lacking, I cannot take control unless I masturbate, leaving myself once again alone in the presence of the other.

There is the ideal: the balance of doing to (him, her) and being done to (by him, her). How often we refuse being done to: there is the radical danger of vulnerability and selfishness. How often we refuse doing to: we avoid the complexity of power and willfulness. How often he does and she is done to: a mute silence accompanies the act.

Two separate stories with the same ending: We fall into bed we fall onto the floor we hold onto we clamber over we grind into each other, hands mouth teeth tongue grope over each other, ass palate thighs throat nipples cunt cock clit. Being entered but I cannot enter. He has no orifice but the act is inside. I have an orifice but my depth is on the surface. He needs to be inside; I need him outside me. I am inside her when I am on her surface. Being on her outside is her inside pleasure, and is a vicarious pleasure for me. He finds a repository for himself in me but he does not find me. I surround him but I want him surrounding me. I grow tired of words, but can my body explain myself when at last, my surface on fire and my core white-hot, I cannot take my own pleasure but can only receive it?

My yearning for perfection endangers me. Now I can either acknowledge the limitations of the pleasures that I have received or remove myself firmly and quietly from the beds of my lovers. I must not be ungrateful. I must not be too grateful. There is a more profound pleasure. There is a limitless hunger. It has only been assuaged, but not satiated. When he, when she, when we recognize our limits, will we have the courage to surpass them?



conger

# The Mother-Daughter Relationship and Sexual Ambivalence

Helle Thorning

*We were in bed having a good time talking about everything and nothing. Feeling very secure, I pressed my body against his, wishing to be totally enclosed by him. He touched my face and my hair and I salivated from pure content, almost overwhelmed by a secure sleep. Then his hands began to move around my body, to my breast and to my vagina. It felt good, yet my muscles started to tighten up—responding with a clear “no.” “Please,” I said, “Not now. I am tired. . . I have a headache. . . I have my period. . . cramps.” I heard myself say this, repeating what had been said many a night before. And we were back again playing the same game: “Why does it always have to end with us fucking?” I ask. “Why do you always get so tired? I like making love to you,” he replies. I turn my back to him, saying: “I don’t give a damn about your enormous male libido, just leave me alone.”*

*But what is it that I really like? What is it that I really want, sexually? Why is it that I turn away from him even though I feel pleasure and rising lust? I do know what I imagine when I masturbate. Yet my innermost sexual fantasies, with their emphasis on passivity and total male dominance, are frightening, because they are so contradictory to what I, as a feminist, think.*

The feminist movement has criticized male-dominated sex and men’s “prick-in-cunt” view of making love. In reaction to the picture of woman as sex-gratifying object, there has been a tendency to separate sensuality from genital fulfillment. The pleasure of penetration is dismissed as emphasis is placed on the psychological comfort of warmth and cuddling security. But isn’t this a retreat to the old myth of female sexuality as spiritual and nonbodily?

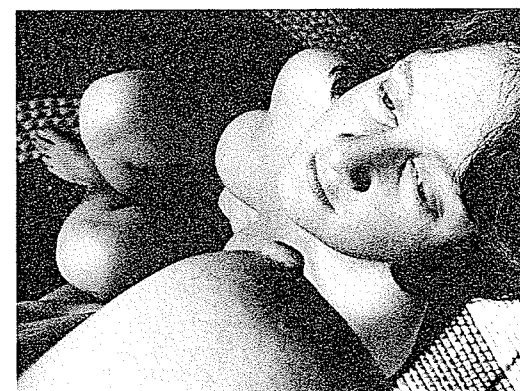
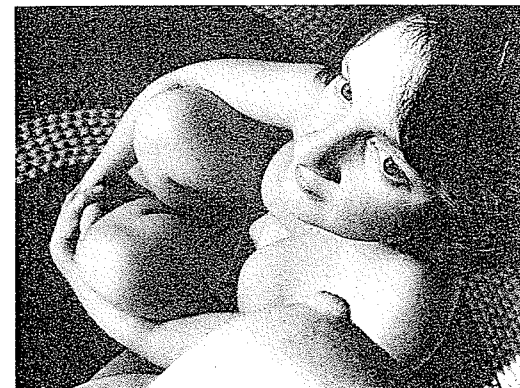
In the past, discussion of sexuality has also centered on the sociological aspects of women’s repression in a male-dominated culture. Critics have focused on social institutions that per-

petuate a restricted definition of the female role. Certainly the feminist movement has done much to raise our awareness of our autonomy and to open opportunities for our independent action—economically, politically, and sexually. Yet many women still find themselves in a psychological bind. Intellectually we may understand the limitations society has placed on us and our need to overcome them. At the same time, in trying to live out a more independent identity, we find ourselves confronted by anxious guilt and ambivalence. Why do I continue to say “leave me alone,” avoiding the issue of sexual arousal?

## The Mother-Daughter Relationship

One way of looking at the contradictions and the ambivalence of female sexuality is to reexamine the close relationship between mothers and daughters. In talking with other women, I have found many similarities in the ways we deal with our mothers. Despite our greater economic independence and more autonomous lifestyles, many of us find ourselves reproducing the same patterns of passivity, guilt, and fear we criticize in our mothers. No matter how often or seldom we are in touch with our mothers, the underlying ties to her are still strong, and she continues to exert an enormous impact on our lives. She was our first love and our first enemy. We still, in one way or another, do what she wants us to do, because we still need her love; at the same time we hate her, because we feel that she doesn’t leave us alone. Talking on the phone to my mother, I am both surprised and furious when she still, after so many years, can tell by the tone of my voice how I am feeling. “No, honestly, I am fine. I AM O.K.,” I tell her, even though we both know that I am feeling pretty bad. I can’t hide anything from *her*.

What is important in this interaction is that our mother was the first person with whom we had a relation-



Mary Clare Powell. *Anne's Dream I*. Mary Clare Powell is a feminist artist living near Washington, D.C., who works primarily with black and white photographs and words, juxtaposed in various forms—slides, exhibits, books.

ship. She was responsible for reproducing in us the same "qualities" that made her a mother and a woman.

*As things are, the mother must do what her mother did before her: teach the daughter to suppress parts of herself in the service of getting a man. Not to provide a daughter with adequate heterosexual skills is to fail at mothering. Sexual desiring must be repressed, its direction channeled towards men, and its energy transformed from active seeking to passive receiving. We've all heard what good girls and ladies don't do.<sup>1</sup>*

*But am I to blame my own personal mother? No. The mother serves as the connection between infant and society. What we must understand is*



Mary Clare Powell. *Anne's Dream II*.

the particular relationship that holds in our society between mothers and daughters and how this interaction fosters female sexual ambivalence.

### The Mother-Child Symbiosis

Let us first look at the general "ideal" pattern of the mother-child interaction in our society. Within the nuclear family the infant is completely dependent on the mother, both physically and emotionally. Without the mother's love, attention, and nurturance the infant cannot survive. Mother and child come to form an insulated unit, in which the mother satisfies the infant's physical and psychological needs, while the infant provides reciprocal gratification for the mother. This early interdependence has been called the mother-child symbiosis.

At first the infant experiences a sense of omnipotence. When it cries, the mother for the most part actively fulfills its needs. Indeed, the mother's needs seem to coincide with those of the infant. The infant is presumed to have no sense of separateness from the mother, no concept of its own limits and boundaries.

As the child matures, it becomes aware of when the mother is in the room and when she is not. Usually recognition of the mother's absence creates fear and insecurity for the child. Who will meet its needs? Now it is the mother who comes to be viewed as all-powerful. Since the child is still physically and emotionally dependent on her, she seems to determine its very existence. Various patterns of pleasing the mother and retaining her attention develop. The mother's own responsiveness to the child is of course a key element in this interaction.

The phase of symbiosis peaks at about four to five months. After this the normal child shows active signs of differentiating itself from the mother. The baby begins to explore its surroundings and is able to tolerate the mother's absence. This is the start of the long process of separation for the child, of the search for autonomy. But this process is problematic. And it may be here that we can see differences in girls' and boys' experiences of the early mother-child relationship.

All children must free themselves from the image of the omnipotent mother in order to gain a sense of completeness and autonomy. From the beginning, the boy is more likely to be treated as a heterosexual other by the mother, precisely because of his maleness. The girl's experience differs on

two counts. First of all, she doesn't have a penis, which offers the son a clear physical distinction from the mother and which, in our society, provides him with a power symbol in opposition to the omnipotent mother. Equally important, however, is that the mother does not connect to the girl as a sexual other, as with the male child, but sees her daughter more as part of herself. She may well overidentify with her daughter and stifle the girl's sexual development to prevent signs of independence. A daughter may also reinvokethe mother's own fears of sexual inadequacy. The mother may be protecting her own sense of vulnerability by restricting the girl's space to develop sexually. Few mothers encourage a girl's play with her body, much less masturbation. The tendency has been to restrain sexual aggression in the girl and emphasize nice, respectable behavior. We can see this as fitting in with the mother's image of herself, which in its turn follows society's expectations. What seems important to underline, however, is that the girl's separation from the mother is complicated by the mother's intense identification with her same-sex daughter. This kind of identification heightens ambivalence about separation and creates the psychological basis for an ongoing symbiosis between mother and daughter.

### Contradictions in Female Sexuality

Marina Moeller Gamberoff points to some of the consequences of the intense early mother-daughter relationship.<sup>2</sup> She describes four women who, from an objective point of view, are economically independent, with responsible jobs. Nevertheless, they feel insecure and afraid. They find themselves constantly turning to their husbands or lovers for approval of every action they take. In some ways, Gamberoff claims, they have re-created the same symbiosis with their men as they had with their mothers. One of these women explains that everything she does, no matter how creative, is only done to please her husband. She withdraws from any responsibility by having him make decisions for her, as if to prove that she is still a well-behaved child. Unconsciously, according to Gamberoff, this woman feels guilty for having broken away from her mother. Her husband now plays the role of her mother, from whom she must hide her autonomy because she is afraid that by showing her independence she will lose love. Here Gamberoff raises the ques-

tion of whether a woman's love/hate relationship with a husband or lover isn't really a *projection* of ambivalent feelings around independence experienced in the early relationship with the mother.

Another view on the impact of the early mother-daughter relationship is given in Maria Torok's article on "The Significance of Penis Envy in Women."<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Freud's emphasis on women's wish for what they lack, Torok interprets penis envy as a displacement of the frustrations in the close tie to the mother. This interpretation is much more positive and constructive. Penis envy, as Torok interprets it, is a symbol for another wish: *women do not want to be men, as Freud claims, but to separate themselves from the omnipotent mother and become whole and autonomous women.*

Both Gamberoff and Torok, as well as other "mother-daughter theorists," suggest a new dimension for discussion within the feminist movement. In addition to recognizing the sexist socialization processes that have influenced our fantasies, we need to address the sources of ambivalence that stem from within ourselves and our earliest interactions with our mothers. What we must now explore are the unconscious components that contribute to the ways we repress ourselves.

One way to do this is to explore our sexual fantasies. Through fantasies and dreams, we can learn much about how we deal psychologically with our sexual needs and the ambivalence that stems from early experience with our mothers. In particular, I wish to look at the fear of acknowledging and taking responsibility for pleasure, the fear of passion, and the need for intimacy. Although I will focus on heterosexual relationships, I hope my discussion will illustrate some underlying problems within all relationships.

### The Fear of Taking Responsibility for Pleasure

*"As he stood there with his arms around her she felt like this could only be a dream. She could hardly tell who she was and what she was doing. Then he kissed her. She felt completely overwhelmed by the feeling, almost enchanted, and she kissed him. Her heart was beating and at this moment she felt like he could do everything to her without her being able to protest."*

*A story like this arouses me sexually. All the romantic rubbish which I intel-*

*lectually dismiss still makes me wet and horny. I have always felt very embarrassed about the fact that I liked reading these novels—even more embarrassed when I was caught reading or buying them. But what is it that makes me react? Quite simply, it is the prince who comes and sweeps me away on his white horse, or it is the tough, macho guy who, with his rough hands and a mixture of tenderness and violence, takes control over my body and absorbs me. The foreplay in the two scenes is different but the end result is the same. I am passive in the situation and disclaim all responsibility. I am powerless and dominated by the man. He fucks me so well that the only thing I can do is to beg him for more. In my fantasy the orgasm fills me up for a long time, leaving me trembling and*

*crying with emotion. (I should emphasize that the man's reaction does not mean anything, except in the way that my body triggers his desire and drives him to fulfill all my wishes. The man is only an extra in my scene.)*

*Another common fantasy involves a visit to the gynecologist. I am lying there completely open, with his total concentration on my sex. He begins the examination. In my fantasy he is tender and very conscious of the way he touches me. Suddenly he can tell that I am reacting differently. He feels my juices, but he does not stop. He continues and somehow prolongs the examination; not a word is said. He inserts the instruments as I get wetter and wetter. He himself is getting aroused by looking at the "beautiful young woman" lying before him. He*

## BOOK OF LOVE



Vanalyne Green. *The Book of Love...* (1981). Based on a performance *I Make Beds*. Vanalyne Green, a multimedia performance artist, works by herself and collaboratively with Feminist Art Workers. She now lives in NYC.

calls his colleague, and as the other doctor enters, he, in one glance, understands what is going to happen. Softly he says to me, "I think I better examine your breasts," and he quickly removes my shirt. I am completely passive and the only thing I can do is to pretend that I don't have the vaguest idea of what's going on. And that's when it really begins. They are all over me, using every entrance and opening in my body. I can't move. I have given myself up to their hands. And then I have a huge orgasm—and that's the end of my fantasy.

If we look at these fantasies they have quite a few things in common:

1. The feeling of lust is determined by the man.
2. The woman restrains herself and allows the initiative to come from the man.
3. The woman expects overwhelming desire from the man and thus does not need to be active.
4. The man takes control over her body with a mixture of violence and tenderness and "uses" her.
5. The woman is in a state of helplessness and powerlessness, dominated by the man.
6. It is, however, *her body* that triggers his desire and her body that drives him to fulfill all her needs without *her* being active.
7. Due to her passivity, she has all of her needs met by the man.

These seven points might be seen as supporting the classical interpretation of female sexuality as inherently narcissistic and masochistic. But we can also attribute these features to a carry-over from the early relationship with the mother. In the process of matur-



ing, the child has to discover its own needs and distinguish itself from its surroundings. This development takes place under the guidance of the mother. If the mother is unable to give her daughter love and space to mature, to separate and to be her own sexual being, the girl may remain stuck in a symbiotic definition. As we saw before, she may end up searching for someone who can provide this, or she may regain the omnipotent partner through fantasies.

Another aspect of the fantasies of dominance is that they create a situation where the woman doesn't have to face the guilt of enjoying any form of pleasure. She can deny that she has any input into the situation; she can say: "I experience pleasure—yes—but it is against my will—I am not responsible for the things that happen." There is a feeling of omnipotence because she is having all of her needs met. As with the mother, the man's needs become secondary.

### The Fear of Letting Go

One reason that women feel the need for fantasies is the fear of giving themselves up to passion. What would happen if we lost control of ourselves? Would we then lose our identity and be completely absorbed by the other person?

*Even in my relationship with the man I feel most secure with, I am unable to give myself up to him and to passion. I am afraid of what would happen if I let go. I fear that I would disappear, that I would totally lose my identity. Twice I have had terrible experiences when my orgasm peaked. I was drunk and had lost some of my defenses. I felt myself falling down, into black darkness. And I cried and cried until I fell asleep. That's why during intercourse I hold onto myself and to my clitoris. I am in control of my body. I give myself only to the point where I can still control the penis in my rhythm.*

One of the most remarkable contradictions of female sexuality is illustrated here—the wish to be totally enclosed by the man and the fear of giving oneself up to him. There is both the fear of losing control and the fear of merging with another person and losing one's identity. This fear of losing one's identity may originate in the early symbiotic relationship with the mother. With all the ambivalence attached to breaking away from the mother, there may be a greater fear of reengulfment in that original oneness.

### The Need for Intimacy

*I often think of my relationship to the man I live with, and what it is that makes me so dependent on him. This dependency stretches from a need for his confirmation of everything I do to an urge to know what he is doing every minute of the day. I feel the symbiosis keeps me from having independent experiences outside our relationship. All the time I need his approval: "Do you love me? Do you love me more than anything? Why do you love me?" Sometimes I think it is his personality that makes me so dependent. But no. I know from earlier relationships that I develop the same kind of dependence with any man.*

In talking to other women about dependency, I found we all voiced a strong need to be close to one person, to have a place that felt like being "home." A place where we could show many sides of our personality and let go of all the different masks. This need for undisturbed harmony resembles the early mother-child relationship. Yet, as we have seen, the wish to merge with another person has great fears attached to it.

### Closing Remarks

In feminist circles there has been a tendency to focus on the sociological aspects of repression, leaving aside the inner conflicts. The contradictions in our psychological makeup must be confronted in order to understand our sexuality. Our self-repression, in seeing our sexuality as *only* tender and emotional, denying lust and the pleasure of penetration, is a barrier to experiencing ourselves as sexual beings.

I find that the theories about early mother-child relations offer an exciting new perspective on female sexuality. Through a clearer understanding of the early determinants of our feelings toward sexuality, we will be better able to define what it is that will give us full sexual satisfaction.

This article is based on a thesis by Talli Ungar Andersen, Vibe Stroer Larsen, and Helle Thorning (University of Copenhagen, 1980).

1. Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster, "Femininity: The Sickness unto Death," presented at "The Second Sex Thirty Years Later" (New York University, Sept. 27-29, 1979).
2. Maria Moeller Gamberoff, "Emanzipation macht Angst," *Kursbuch 47, Frauen* (1977).
3. Maria Torok, "The Significance of Penis Envy in Women," *Female Sexuality*, ed. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970).

Helle Thorning, a psychology student from Denmark, is now working in NYC at an East Harlem pre-school and the Women's Counseling Project.



# Anatomies and Destinies (Fragments)

Nancy Huston

The four feet of the parents in bed in the morning: yellow, hardened, repulsive skin, especially around the heels; twisted grimy toenails. Long members wallowing in the sheets. Strong odor of dried sweat, ashes, and sex.

Immense bodies with outlandish organs. Breasts whose color doesn't match the rest. Tight wiry shocking hairs on the too-white chest and back of the father. Vast, soft expanses of skin. Scrapy contact with badly shaved maternal calves, rough touch of adult hands mussing my hair. I look at the monstrous thighs of these beings and compare them with my own: so thin, nothing but a straight line, the natural link between knees and hips.

The bodies move, get up, and dress themselves with frightening mechanical movements and indecipherable prattling noises. Lipstick, glasses, razors, combs, ties, girdles, bras, applied or added to the surface of these bodies in order to transform them. Or better yet; to hide them.

The paint dribbles cold on the nape of my neck and runs down the length of my backbone; I shiver. My brother wields the paintbrush with dexterity, drawing long, green lines from my shoulder blades to my armpits, from my buttocks to my neck. The thick liquid clots and cakes on my skin. My brother shouts with laughter as he sees my face become distorted by the oozing mask of paint. The paintbrush tickles as it slides under my chin, titillates my nipples and my clit.

It's my turn and I start with his stomach, then cover his penis and tiny balls with paint in a series of provocative swirls. With great hilarity we drop the brushes, plunge our hands into the can of paint, and slap them on each other's heads. Dripping and hysterical, we run to look at ourselves in the mirror: two Martians.

In the empty bathtub we cling to one another and scream with pain. The turpentine sears our skin. The mother's movements are ungentle; she scrubs us with a nailbrush until the green has turned dark red. She grumbles and we weep.

"Did you know you've got a piece of skin in there that's going to be broken one day?"

"Where?"

"At the end of the tunnel. Do you want me to prove it?"

"How?"

"I'll put one finger in the hole in front and one finger in the hole in back."

"Okay, but be gentle."

"Does that hurt?"

"No, it's all right."

"There, you see? My fingers are touching except that there's a kind of wall of skin between."

"Really?"

"Mommy said she's the boss around here."

"Yeah, but Daddy's the manager."

"What's a manager?"

"The boss of the boss."

One of my brother's friends doesn't have a little sister; he has never seen a girl's or woman's sex. Incredulous: "Not even your mother's?" "Never." I pull down my pants. "Look, you idiot. It's nothing to be afraid of." But he backs away (though without averting his eyes). I take my pants off the rest of the way and chase him around the room, thrusting my pelvis forward and spreading the lips of my vagina with my fingers. He yells and disappears. My brother and I collapse in helpless laughter.

One day I go to verify the good condition of the father's organ. I pull at the elastic of his underpants to get a glimpse. I am told that I have grown too big for that.

I know myself through touch and through my reflection in a pocket mirror.

One morning, lying in bed next to the mother, my brother says to me, "Could I put my car in your garage?" The mother wakes up and says, "I heard you. Don't think I don't understand your dirty code."

Henceforth, "dirty" will mean anything of value, anything worth seeking out. Each time we make a new friend, we will ask each other, "Do you think (s)he's dirty?"

The empty bottle lying on the gravel describes one, two, three rapid circles, comes to a stop and points, designating with certainty and indifference. Sometimes we argue about which of us it has chosen, but usually there is no room for doubt. The garage is very cold. Shoes and stockings cannot be taken off first. Hesitation: the eyeglasses, of course, the hats and mittens, all the accouterments of winter with which we're only too happy to part. A skirt has already been removed, revealing a white slip and two bluish knees. A boy's torso has been denuded; it is covered with goosepimples and protected by two skinny arms, the freezing air serving as a pretext for modesty.

The mother does my hair by separating it into two thick locks, brushing each of them until my scalp stings, and finally attaching them to my temples with a rubber band. My brother gets his hair cut by the father with an electric razor. He whines, horrified at the sight of the little heaps of himself lying on the floor. We recognize each other through caresses at the softness of our skin: the skin at the small of the back, the skin on the inside of the thighs.

My brother has set fire to the garage. He has been whipped with the father's belt as I have never in my life been whipped.....

Nancy Huston, active in the women's movement in France, has published two books: *Jouer au papa et à l'amant* (a study of paternity and pedophilia) and *Dire et interdire* (on the functions of linguistic taboo). "Anatomies and Destinies (Fragments)" was originally published by the feminist monthly newspaper *Histoires d'Elles*.

I'd love to tell you how it feels.

When it's riding you out to the sky, and your whole body is huddled in a point, and then it rockets away from you on waves. I guess something about the ocean says it best. The smell. The origin there. Conceived and then burst into a billion cells. I mean we have all been intimate with the deepest creative experience. We've all been born.

I think people who are lost. That's what they're most lost from. And sex. Well that is one of the simplest and most thrilling ways to get it back again.

Sometimes I think if I could make love once a week very awesomely, well that would really take care of it. But then when someone is around, I mean someone I love, then I want to do it a lot more. And then I think it's mostly for affection. Then the coming part is different. It's a level that can be thoroughly satisfying, but I don't have to have those stars. It's almost bureaucratic. If I don't *need* to come, I don't. Then there are some days when I wake up, and I know that at a certain second someone's going to touch me on

the shoulder, and I'm going to quake. It definitely gets easier. It never happened at all with my first lover. There are those degrees. Where it's a certain kind of thing that doesn't shake the sides. And then the one that grabs you so hard and takes you all the way there. I believe it's really the easiest way to understand the state of grace. And then when the lover begins to hoot and holler because he knows you've got it, then that's the best. I've only met a few men who could really gauge a wave.

I decided I didn't care about making love with a lot of men because it takes so long to learn someone in that way. It always feels like such a big struggle, and then the best are always the ones you are going to love in manifold.

I used to be so afraid of being sexy. Now it really tickles me. I like to get to the part where I can wear a slip. It still takes me a while to get down. And I really only can with someone I like a lot. But then it's like the dance. And there's the step you do for yourself. And the step you do for your lover. And the step for the audience too. That's a push-up on white porcelain.

I guess certain people like certain things. I knew one who would grab my hair just above the wedge and make like he was going to touch that in the triangle there. I loved the feeling of the tease. It wasn't technique. He was learning to play an instrument well.

Men say the biggest thrill is to make it good for a woman. I can see how they'd come to that. I'd really love to know what other people feel.

Kissing is my favorite part.

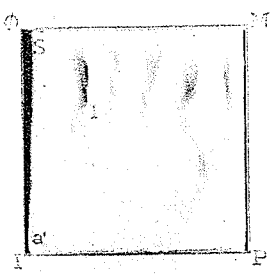
I like to stop before it all explodes. Just lying together and breathing together. Connected by a stick and a hole. If I concentrate on what the space in my sex is holding, I can feel like I have a penis. We used to laugh that it was like being both sexes at the same time. And it is.

Society definitely makes us shy. Women I mean. I bet those reports about women's sexual peaks at 30 have to do with it actually taking a decade to overcome a certain kind of timidity.

Last year I saw this man at a party. We weren't introduced but I found out his name. I thought about him passionately for three days. Then I called information and got his number. Called him up and casually invited him to meet me, explaining about the party we had been at together the weekend before. I was practically throwing up. But it was so instructive to realize what the social dating procedure feels like. He was busy and disinterested. After the phone call, it lost its significance for me. Except for the fat understanding of what men have to go through all the time. Meet a girl, make a date, get laid. It's terrifying. And obviously drives them to wanting to *get a little*

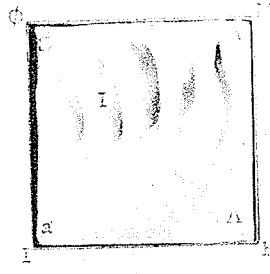
as some compensation for the uneasiness of the situation. Consequently, a woman is expected to submissively ride alongside being sexually ignored and abused.

Until hopefully one day. She sees a clean sheet on the line with dry air blowing through it, and she decides that's the way she wants to feel.



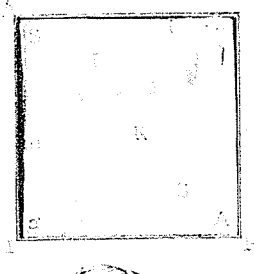
It's aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work. I can't count the number of 'small wounds' I've got as the result of his throwing, kicking, biting etc..... It's not the only object of his wrath but it's probably the source. Maybe I should stay at home ...but we need the money.

T4 7.3.76 AGE 2.6



I'm really enjoying my present relationship with K. going out to lunch, to the park, shopping together. There're no potty problems and few tantrums. He's fulfilling my fantasy image of a son as little companion-lover. The lack of tension seems to be related to his being able to act out aggression or affection on inanimate objects like 'teddy' and 'blankie'.

T6 5.4.76 AGE 2.7



This seems to be a new phase of sexual curiosity for K. showing us his willy etc. once he called it 'chicken 'n chips'. When we read the ABC book, after 'A is for apple' he points to me and says... 'There's a breast in there's a breast'. He notices what I wear too...he likes my 'shiny' shoes and 'feathery' coat. I enjoy his attention but it's made me more self-conscious about cuddling him so much. It's made me more aware of myself too...of being 'feminine'.

T8 2.5.76 AGE 2.8

Mary Kelly, active in the women's movement and a founding member of

# THE BABYMAN

SONDRA SEGAL (from the play *Electra Speaks* © 1980, Part III of *The Daughters Cycle* by Clare Coss, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar)

Once upon a time there was a baby  
 an infant, a baby, a joy  
 he sucked at his mother's breast  
 his mother gave him suck  
 his mother gave his sustenance  
 her milk kept him alive  
 her breast was all that he wanted  
 food, nurturance, warmth  
 his mother kept him alive  
 his mother became his food  
 his mother was his nurturance  
 food, nurturance, warmth  
 his mother, her breast, were his.

He's never given it up  
 his mother's milk is his  
 her breast belongs to him  
 he's turned her into a tit  
 a jug a tit a boob  
 a nipple in a tight sweater  
 a titty a boob a bust  
 she's a cunt a hole  
 a dark deep hole a cave  
 a pussy a snatch a slit  
 a titty a boob a knocker a bust  
 a beaver a twat  
 a pussy a snatch a slit  
 she's his  
 her body belongs to him  
 her cunt is his  
 and her breast  
 her thighs wrapped around his hips  
 her pussy around his prick  
 her titty in his mouth  
 this baby, this infant, this boy  
 has colonized her body  
 this needy sucking babe  
 has kept his mommy his food  
 he eats her at his will.

Nurtured by woman as food, he creates  
 he creates his institutions  
 religion family law  
 philosophy education  
 at night he sucks her titty  
 by day he wreaks his vengeance  
 this baby man hates his mommy  
 what he does in the world  
 is the proof  
 this baby man hates his mommy  
 his need his need his need  
 he thinks she keeps him alive  
 he fears that her breast is hers  
 he dreads the sound of his whimper  
 he hides in his mommy's body  
 he suspects that she may know this  
 he fears that she can see him  
 he fears she knows that she feeds him.

he reaches out for his mother  
 lays his head against her breast  
 wraps his arms around her body  
 and yearns for her to caress him  
 he is soothed by the sound of her heartbeat  
 and the salty taste of her body  
 he wants to be inside her  
 and reaches out for her body  
 he yearns to be inside her  
 he enters his mother's body  
 he wants to be inside her  
 he thrusts himself into her body  
 he fucks her  
 he fucks his mommy  
 he'll show her  
 he really will  
 he fucks her, he rapes his mommy  
 he rams it down her throat  
 he rapes her, he hates his mommy  
 he takes her in the ass

he plugs her, he slugs his mommy  
 he says he'll fuck her blind  
 he smashes her in the mouth  
 he beats her black and blue  
 he fucks the shit out of her  
 he kicks her pregnant belly  
 he throws her down the stairs  
 he slugs her  
 he hits her  
 he beats her  
 he hurts her  
 he rapes her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he hates her  
 he begs for her forgiveness  
 he begs for her forgiveness  
 why this baby, this boy, this baby man  
 he's just a mass of contradictions  
 claims reason for himself  
 institutionalizes his hatred  
 gives her his seat on the bus  
 wages war on Indochina  
 and nods off in front of the TV  
 and dreams of mommy  
 and dreams of power

This baby will not grow up  
 he thinks he can do what he wants  
 he has fastened his mouth on my life.

Sondra Segal, an artistic director of the Women's Experimental Theater, is currently at work on a new play—*Food*.  
 © 1981 Sondra Segal

# Interviews with Five Faghagging Women

Camilla Decarnin

Not much has been written on the phenomenon, or rather the set of phenomena, called faghagging.\* One recent book, *The New Couple: Women and Gay Men*, deals with heterosexual women only. The women I interviewed included a high proportion of lesbians; all the women interviewed were feminists. As one of my interviewees pointed out, there is not a single faghag population. Faghagging is a complex subject with potential for a lot of research, as well as potential for overgeneralization and misunderstanding.

Faghagging is not new and has appeared in some women's writing. Maureen Duffy, in *The Microcosm*, described a woman first becoming aware of her lesbianism by feeling strong fascination for two men who were, it was explained to her, homosexuals. In the well-known novels of Mary Renault and more recently in those of Patricia Nell Warren, the faghagging element is exceptionally clear. The empathy for gay men that Elizabeth A. Lynn expresses in her science fiction novel *A Different Light* is well matched by her awareness of women's issues; this is not the case with all women who write sympathetically about gay men, and for some, like Warren, strong male identification is evident.

This leads to the question of why some women are primarily attracted to gay men. I would suggest that women whose primary erotic objects are gay men have consciously or otherwise recognized men's valued position in society and desired to be valued as men are valued, while retaining a wish to be erotic with men. Their erotic response to faggots comprises an awareness of a situation in which the erotic object is both sexually and socially valued by other males—in other words, the woman recognizes in the faggot a socio-erotic position she herself would like to hold, as the recognized peer *and* the lover of a male, a position impossible for women in sexist culture to secure. I believe this is the basis for the eroticization of gay men by women.

**Do gay men in general attract you? More than straight men? Are gay men your primary turn-on, the one that works fastest and most reliably?**

**Solo:** A straight man can look good to me but . . . when I know a man is gay, when he's picked up some of the gay male cultural tricks and mannerisms, I don't know, it just turns me on. Not just any gay man, but a certain type is definitely the fastest turn-on.

**Lacey:** Definitely more than straight men.

**Lee:** Much more than straight men. Dykes are my primary turn-on. I'm a "gayhag," is what I am; I'm turned on to queerness. I think queers are gorgeous!

**Amalthea:** I would be far more turned on by a woman I thought might be gay than by a gay man or straight man. I find it easier to get along with gay men than straight men . . . gay men are not going to view me as an actual or potential sex object so I don't need to worry

or struggle with the person to define the relationship as nonsexual. Also, it seems some gay men I'd be more likely to relate to would have had to deal with machismo and would be more sensitive to that—I'm saying that as a generalization only.

**Michelle:** During the time I lived with Dan (two years), I was deathly afraid that I *was* attracted only to gay men. . . . It never occurred to me then that I was simply inexperienced. I developed a theory of "safe" men and would say that I befriended married men, gay men, related men, far-away men so that I wouldn't have to hassle with sex. Then, too, my brother and I were experiencing an intensification and revival of our friendship, and I became involved in the circle of friends he had developed . . . entirely made up of gay men, one lesbian, and a self-admitted faghag. [Since then] I have not been more attracted to gay men than I have been to straight men. . . . Gay men, as do all men, have learned that women can be used to listen to them, to sup-

\*A faghag is a woman, whether lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, who devotes an important part of her social, affectional, or sexual attention specifically to homosexual men and who finds them erotically interesting because of their homosexuality. This attention need not be overt; it can take the form of fantasies. The word "faggot," like the word "dyke," is used by the author and by the interviewees in a revolutionary and affirming, not a pejorative, sense.

port them, to *mother* them through their emotional crises . . . the friendship between gay man and straight woman becomes one that steadily drains energy from the woman. I don't think I could ever again say I was a faghag.

**What was the first time you were attracted to a man you knew was gay? Were you friends? How old were you? Would you say you were in love, or had a crush on him?**

**Solo:** I was 21 . . . I had been very turned on by the idea of gay male sex and love between men, in stories and so on, but I think Tommy was the first gay man I ever really got to talk to. We didn't become close, because I was very shy and awkward, especially with men, but I developed a crush on him.

**Lacey:** When I was 17 and coming out as a lesbian, the boyfriend I had then told me he'd been having an affair with another boy. And we got into some fantasies about dressing him up as a girl, but we never did. My girlfriend that I was in love with at the

time—we both went after Stan; we would tease him a lot, we would fondle him and bite his ears and he would scream and roll around and say, “Stop, stop!” I had sex with him: we decided we were going to do it and we got in the car and drove, till we found a place. He was probably the most positive fuck of all the men I had at that time.

**Lee:** I guess my late teens—about 12 to 15 years ago. We were friends and I didn’t think of it at the time as a sexual attraction, just as affection. I see now there was an erotic component.

**Amalthea:** I would have been about 20 at the time. It was a close and supportive friendship. He was a bit younger, about 19.

**Michelle:** I was 21 years old. But I can’t say I was attracted to him because I “knew” he was gay. He continually made references to a secret that he had never been able to discuss with anyone else and which had ruined several relationships with other women for him. I wonder how I could have been so naive as to have missed all the obvious hints. Still my reasons for loving him suffered no change when Dan did tell me he was gay. I began to center my life around him. Later I bitterly commented that my journal had become a journal about *him* rather than about myself. Telling me that he was gay, coming out to me, seemed to me a great compliment and demonstration of trust. And I was even more attracted to him. We did eventually have sex. The first time, in fact, was on the night Dan finally broke down and told me that he was attracted to men. I had been wanting to have sex with him for more than a year and deathly afraid to instigate it. I was not very successfully repressing the fear that the platonic nature of our friendship was due to my physical inadequacies—not being beautiful, not being thin, not having had enough experience. We eventually decided to live with one another, and very quickly that arrangement became one in which we were not lovers, merely housemates. Our relationship resembled in most other ways that of a “couple.” We shopped together, we went out together, we entertained together, we went on vacations together. We quarreled, we clung to one another. I continued to be frustrated that my sexual interest was not returned by Dan, but added the extra burden of

guilt that I was somehow wrong for wanting that, or certainly for pressing for that. It became an extremely painful thing to me that Dan was attracted to friends of mine—other men—and that he eventually developed a crush on my brother, who had been out of the closet for several years.

**Do you like gay men as people to be with? Why/why not? What do you feel is different about the way you relate to them and they to you, as opposed to the way you relate to straight men?**

**Solo:** I’m not crazy about gay men in Real Life, more my fantasy of them. Men have to be pretty feminist for me to like them, and most faggots aren’t. The main difference is that they give a woman more space, sexually, than a straight man will—that’s important to me, not to have that predatory thing going on with someone I’m trying to talk to rationally as one human being to another.

**Lacey:** Gay men don’t have quite the same expectations that I’ll take total care of them that straight men do. However, gay men are hard to be with because they’re not feminists. Gay men are better sex than straight men—they know they don’t know about women’s bodies so they don’t get freaked out usually if I want to masturbate. They are also much more willing to go down on me than straight men are, believe it or not. But they don’t understand why your asshole isn’t wide open every minute, they don’t understand that at all [laughs], they expect it to just [makes a sucking sound]. I also like the experience of fucking a man, of penetrating *him*, and gay men enjoy that.

**Lee:** The nice thing about gay men is that they are more capable of respecting my own gayness. Taking my homosexuality as a background assumption makes it easier for me to do things that would appear to contradict it. I’m reluctant to do those things if they are likely to be construed as evidence of heterosexuality on my part.

**Amalthea:** As people to be with I like them often, not always. I do feel sometimes the gay male culture is a closed society. I think things are said and done that are derogatory to women. In 1979 I went to see a play... produced in a gay male leather bar. The only female character in the play was essentially an Anita Bryant character. So after the

play was over someone invited the audience to make criticism and comments. One of the owners of the bar got up—in the play women were not welcome in the bar—and said, “You know, we really don’t want women in here.” One difference—I tend to trust gay men not to hurt me. If I had to walk through Buena Vista Park at night, I would far rather run into two gay men getting it on behind a bush than a straight man. My friendships tend to be with gay men, my contacts with straight men tend to be professional—it can be cordial and respectful. Non-macho and warm characteristics are ones I like.

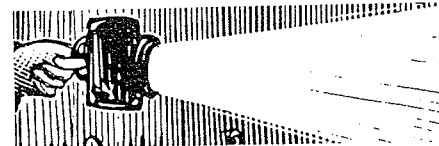
**Michelle:** I will often trust a gay man more on first meeting.

**What is it about gay men that you think attracts you particularly? Are you actually interested in sex with them?**

**Solo:** I’m not that interested in sex with anyone, most of the time. But what I think turns me on is the idea of two men having an emotional relationship. It’s like the only way I could imagine having an egalitarian relationship with a man would be to be a man, and that idea, of relating equally to a man, was something that I wanted really badly for a long time. One thing that attracts me is the way they look—not so much now, in America, because the short hair and mustache thing bores me, but they do try to make themselves look good, which is usually ignored by men or comes out all in a physique thing rather than a pretty face or some really sensual way of dressing.

**Lacey:** They’re more masculine—I like masculinity in men and women—when it’s not connected to privilege, when it’s decorative. By masculinity I mean physical strength, aggressive personal style, independent personality and appearance, like, oh, beard, Levi’s, leather. Another thing I like is drag—on men and women. I guess what it is is the ability to play with masculinity and femininity in a sexual context.

**Lee:** Sometimes I am interested in actual sex with them. There are several



things that attract me about them. They tend to treat their bodies more as sexual objects and to present themselves as fuckable. Secondly, their ideas of sex tend to be less rigid than those of straight men. Thirdly, I'm into S/M and I'm a bottom. Few straight male tops have attitudes about women in general which would make me feel inclined to bottom for them. I would not want to get into a situation where my masochism would be interpreted as implying anything about women's proper place, *ad nauseam*. Whereas gay male S/M tends to have less anti-feminist baggage—I don't know if that's true, actually; it's true in terms of the actual sex, it's not true in terms of their other assumptions. For instance, a gay male top is going to know that many men are bottoms and isn't going to make an equation between men = top and women = bottom. The imagery that's common in gay male S/M culture, of boots and leather and motorcycles and studded belts, is attractive to me, whether it's displayed by women or by men. I find them, their culture, their imagery, and all of those accouterments quite beautiful. Lesbian culture tends to emphasize monogamy, fidelity, and thinking of sex as an artifact of love and marriage. I like promiscuity, group sex, casual sex, recreational sex.

**Michelle:** I'd call the attribute one of *sympathy*, or perhaps, empathy. The ability to care and talk about emotional feelings is getting to be less of a rare thing for straight men, and it is a quality that many gay men share and actively seek to learn. Knowing the man is gay in no way prevents me from being attracted to and imagining having sex with him. I've simply become

much more cautious with my actions.

**Have you had sex with gay men? Was it different from sex with straight men? How? Was it what you expected?**

[Solo and Amalthea had never had sex with a gay man.]

**Lacey:** I have a lot of different kinds of sex with gay men. One of the most frequent things I do is fistfucking them, a process that takes hours, lots of Crisco, and amyl. It's hot—I get some of my self-esteem as a woman back when some man is on his back and I've got my arm up to the elbow in his asshole—and it does him so much good. I also like to do S/M, either in a dominant or submissive role. More often dominant. Those are the faggots that I hang out with—the S/M men; they supported me when I was coming out in S/M.

**Lee:** I was afraid that either I wouldn't like it at all and that the reality would be repulsive, although the fantasy was quite appealing, or that I would like it a whole lot and that maybe I wouldn't be a lesbian anymore. What happened was that I found it very enjoyable, but it didn't change my primary orientation towards women.

**Michelle:** Sex with gay men is not different, as far as I can tell, from sex with straight men. . . . What is different is what happens afterward. . . . With a straight man, sex becomes easier. . . . with a gay man, sex becomes more and more strained. . . . more an expression of concession to the woman. No, I hadn't expected that. I had expected sex (doesn't the American Dream say this?) would make Dan love me more. Talking with other women who have lived with gay men, I found

similar descriptions of sexual relationships.

**What do you think of the term "fag-hag"? Do you describe yourself that way?**

**Solo:** I personally have always preferred "fag" or "faggot" to other terms for gay men, even though I'm careful how I use them. So I tend to like "fag-hag" all right. It depends on who says it and why. Faghags are using the term when they come out, affirming it.

**Lacey:** The first time I heard it was in a gay bar in Salt Lake City about 1972. This woman who was real made-up, very feminine, was sitting and laughing and carrying on at a table of gay men and I asked my friend who had been gay 10 to 15 years, "Who's that woman; is she a lesbian?" My friend said real contemptuously, "She's not gay. She's a faghag." I think the term is usually used as an insult. I call myself that, but it's wry.

**Lee:** Sometimes I describe myself that way to be outrageous. Mostly I describe myself as a lesbian. It's a peculiar term. [Faghags] are not quite straight and they aren't gay—I'm thinking of the *faghaggus classicus*. So, like many phenomena that don't fit into clean categories, they cause a great deal of anxiety, and the term reflects that anxiety. There're a variety of interactions between women, both gay and straight, and gay men, for which there is only this one term of faghagging. As such it reduces a rich set of interactions to an ugly stereotype. As inadequate as faghaggery is, as full of stereotypes and implicit putdowns, at least it's a word. While many gay men go ahead and have sex with women, there's no equivalent term or con-



sciousness of it. Thus a gay man who has sex with a woman doesn't risk a pejorative label. The structure of the situation is such, therefore, that as usual women are at more of a disadvantage than men.

**Amalthea:** It does seem to be a male-identified term, identifying a woman in terms of the fact that she's close to gay men. I wouldn't want to start out with gay men as my first allegiance, so to speak.

**Michelle:** I *detest* the word "faghag," even after being turned on to the word "hag" in *Gyn/Ecology* [Mary Daly] and having the political significance of "fag" explained to me. The word, when used by gay men, seems to me the equivalent of "the old lady," or a carnie's "mark." While Dan and I lived with one another, he used me sometimes as a "cover" to those he preferred not to come out to; he used me as a housekeeper; and he used me emotionally. I cringe every time I see an adoring woman hanging on an obviously gay man who pays not much attention to her.

#### Describe your ideal faggot.

**Solo:** A feminist, not too tall, with long hair and loose morals. I like perverse clothing: hippy-femme drag, leather, ragged jeans, anything just a bit off or swaggery and colorful. Clothes are really important to me; I'm rarely turned on by a bare bod.

**Lacey:** One favorite is a very tall, slender, dark queen with real aristocratic features...Las Vegas showgirl type drag. The other one is older, mid-40's...very butch....

**Lee:** In leather, in boots, and dominant.

**Amalthea:** The most ideal person I have known is Max. He's diminutive in an adorable way. I think it's beautiful; I like that size. His hair is dark; he has a beard...very warm, very friendly. My mother met him and told me how darling and adorable he was—our gut reactions were identical! There's a certain maternal part of it. I've always felt very protective about him. He's always very encouraging, very feminist.

**Michelle:** I can't really describe my "ideal faggot" any more than I can describe my ideal lover. I really am rather repelled by the idea of drawing up a physical spec...I might be able to draw up a list of ideal personality traits....

**Have you ever wanted to be a faggot? If not actually to be one, have you ever taken the role of a gay man or boy in fantasies? How would you describe the role?**

**Solo:** Since I was 19 or so I've fantasized about being a beautiful boy in either a loving or hating relationship with a man. I think that to try to transform that fantasy into reality, by a sex change or something, would be to lose a lot of things about being a woman—maybe even multiple orgasm, who knows, but social and political things—that I need. I am lazy enough that if I were a man, I might be a real pig. Being female keeps me honest. Even if I were a faggot, I'd find it real hard to deal with men's head trips. I wouldn't mind *looking* like a faggot, though.

**Lacey:** I've wanted to be a faggot because they have so much access to

casual sex and kinky sex. In fantasy my partner or me, or both of us, can pretend to be gay men during a sexual encounter. Masturbation fantasies often focus on gay men, usually on a younger man who's being overpowered by a group of older men—[wicked look] and taught how to take it. It's not really a rape, though, it's an initiation, a ritual.

**Lee:** Well, as a matter of fact, actually, I have... Part of my own gay identity is involved with some form of transsexuality. I have a complicated relationship to my own gender, but a good portion of the time I feel more male than female. It's not a great distance to travel in fantasy from being a butch dyke to being a butch faggot. I'm also very turned on by anal sex; thus one of my favorite fantasies is to be a boy or a gay man captured, ravished, abused, and anally fucked by one or more gay motorcyclists.

**Amalthea:** No, although we've exchanged jests...sometimes gay men have said, "We're going to make you into a faggot before we're through," in a kidding way.

**What is your sexual orientation right now? (Lesbians: Do you see your faggotry as connected to your coming out? How?)**

**Solo:** My sexual orientation is that I'm totally confused. No, actually, it just changes with every person I turn on to...mostly queers of either sex. I like perversity; it's very positive to me. Anything that isn't what it's supposed to be, anything defiant. Back when I was being as lesbian as I could, faghaggotry was a factor in making being a dyke



feel tough and romantic... I picked up the idea of being queer as revolutionary through my idea of faggots first.

**Lacey:** About 90% of my partners are women, and my primary relationship is with a woman; however, the 10% of sex I have with men is an indispensable 10% and I wouldn't be happy without it. I loved the gayness in men before I could accept my own homosexuality.

**Lee:** My sexual orientation right now is lesbian sadomasochist with a strong latent interest in gay men and a weaker latent interest in boys, or say, youth. I'm probably a latent faggot.

**Amalthea:** My sexuality gets expressed in a diffuse way—the assumption is that you have nonsexual interests in a faghag relationship. I'm a lesbian and a feminist but not a separatist. I feel closer to Sappho and Alice B. Toklas than to separatists, I think; I like flowing clothes and some of those more feminine elements. In music it's like the difference between a sixteenth-century madrigal and hard rock.

**Michelle:** I consider myself heterosexual though I have had several abortive affairs with women. I was ashamed of myself when I recognized the same willingness to go along with the needs of these women [as appeared in] Dan's acquiescence to my desires. My curiosity satisfied, I became less and less interested... and felt much at fault for having hurt them. I see these experiments in connection with... having lived in the gay world for several years.

**Does it bother you to be attracted to men who probably won't be deeply**

**attracted to you? Has this caused problems before?**

**Solo:** That my most natural sexual responses are toward men is a drag, considering their attitudes toward women. That's one reason it doesn't really bother me that they don't turn on to me with great fervor. I used to want them to love me, but I don't think it ever caused me unbearable anguish. At least, I survived.

**Lacey:** Yes. I'm always afraid I'm really gonna fall in love with them. Casual sex with them can often be negotiated, but a romance would be a catastrophe.

**Lee:** Because I'm not that deeply attracted to them, it's actually rather convenient.

**Amalthea:** What does sometimes bother me is I may make a more intense emotional investment in gay men than they make in me. With that kind of asymmetry I can try to moderate it, try to make it a center for humor.

**Michelle:** I feel that I am giving far more than is being offered in return, and however much I try to say it doesn't matter, I get to feeling bitter at the unfairness of the situation. I shudder to think how much this... might be intensified if I were monogamous by nature.

**What do you think is your basic attitude toward men in general? Do you have mixed feelings?**

**Solo:** That they are real spoiled, and that few of them are worth crossing the street for; but at the same time, even knowing what they are like inside, the way they *look* can turn my mind to

putty. I guess that's mixed feelings.

**Lacey:** I think men in general are real shits. They shouldn't be running the world. This makes my few moments of intimacy with men very precious. Men in general are the enemy.

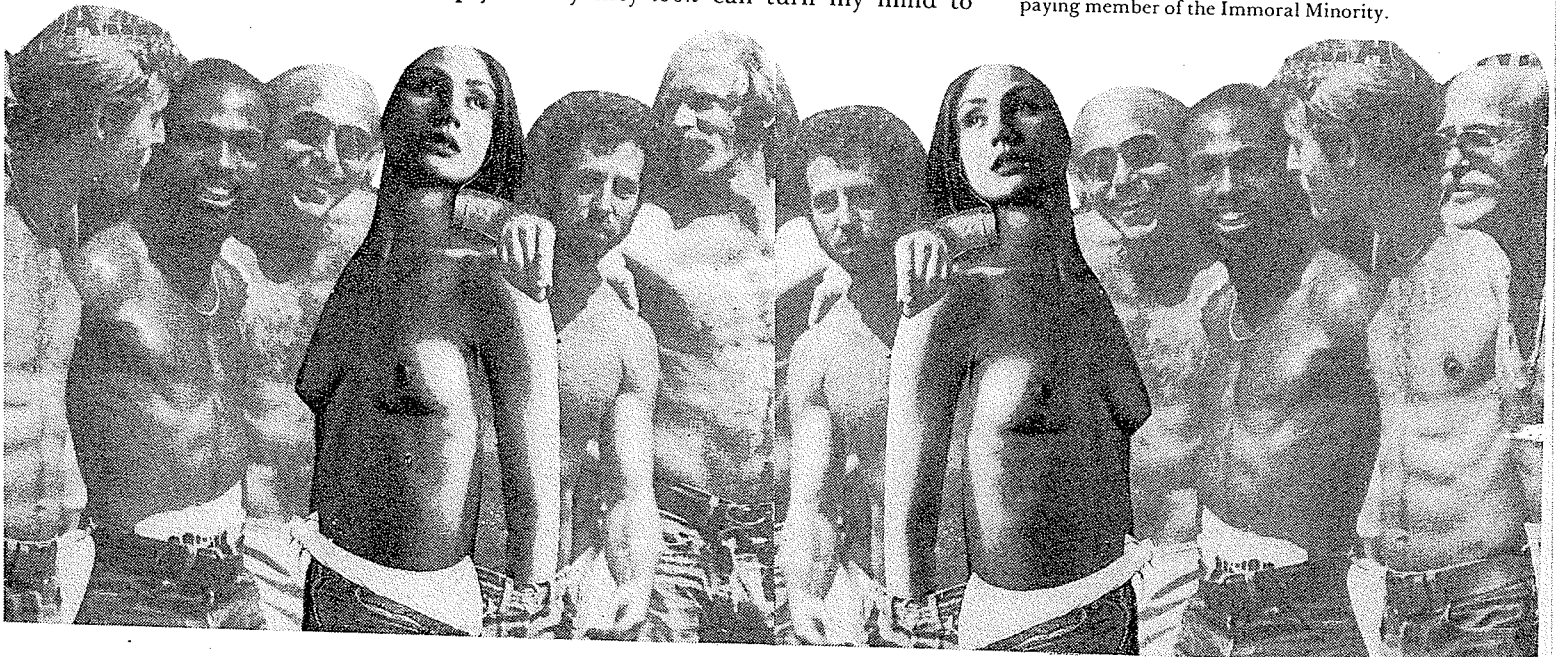
**Lee:** Most of them I don't like, most of them make me angry. In spite of this I have a few valued male friends and I don't think all men are horrible.

**Amalthea:** I don't think of men as potential sexual connections... When I have to deal with men I don't know, I can be very paranoid, not necessarily without basis. If I were walking down a street at night and saw a man of indeterminate sexuality, I would feel a bit intimidated; if I saw a woman I would feel quite safe; if I saw two gay men I would feel safer than if there were no one there.

**Michelle:** I think they are a necessary evil in many ways. I'd have a lot of improvements to suggest if I had the power to resocialize them. I feel much sympathy for the main character in *The Bleeding Heart* who, intellectually, would rather live alone, but to whom the emotional and sexual ties are addicting and never let one entirely let go of relationships with men.

The generous, open responses of these women have encouraged me to continue interviewing. Any woman who might be interested should contact me at 512B Cole Street, San Francisco, CA94117. A complete version of this interview is available. Please enclose postage for three ounces.

Camilla Decarnin writes science fiction and criticism between temp jobs in San Francisco's financial district. She defines herself sexually as a radical feminist, practicing pervert, and dues-paying member of the Immoral Minority.







## take #6

i mean isn't sex a natural function? something you need to survive? like you need to eat and go to the bathroom and sleep? i mean isn't that what everybody always says? so then if i'm a black woman and i must have sex in order to survive then what am i supposed to do now that he can't do it? should i become a bulldagger? what? don't say bulldagger? really? they don't like that? oh. i didn't know. i didn't mean any harm or anything. lesbian? lesbian? ok. ok. well whatever they wanna be called i'm not ready to be one. that really ain't my stick. i can deal with women who say that this is something they want to do. more power to them. everybody's gotta do they own thang. but not me. and i could never get down with a white dude. sometime i see a white dude on the bus or in a magazine or something that reminds me of robert redford or somebody like that. now he is definitely fine. no doubt about that. so is clint eastwood in a rugged sort of way. but i couldn't. i mean i just can't even think about that. no matter how fine he is he's still white isn't he? masturbate? who me? uggggh! that's nasty! well, ok. i mean i know it's not nasty nasty. but it's weird or something. i mean touching yourself. that would just remind me all over again how screwed up i am. can't get no man. got to jack my ownself off. it's not natural. you know? not for me anyway. i don't know. this shit is really really weird.

## take #5

do you hear me! i said are you ready for this muthafucka! talkin' bout our manhood. tryin' to make us believe we are not the natural fuckin' men we know we have always been and always will be. we know better though. i say we know better. hahaha. even his woman knows. hahaha. why you think she will lie and sneak and do anything to get next to us? we the joint! that's why. do you hear me? natural men. that's what we are. we don't need nobody's survey to tell us bout our bidness. what do they know? and who told them this stuff anyway? ever think about that? where did they get their information from? who talked? claiming they couldn't reach none of us for comment. now if you want to know what i think—some of those sick women of ours talked. you know the kind i mean. they too sick to see the natural beauty of themselves as our queens and servants. they want to be equal! that's what they say. i say they want to be men. and you know what we call those kind of women. hmmmmp! do you hear me? yeah we know bout their perverted sickness. cuz no woman can do what a man does. period. she got no bidness

even talkin' that stuff. and the correct women the together women they know this. they will even tell you the same thing. they like things the way they are and don't want to change. they know their place is behind their blackman giving him that good stuff he needs so he can come out here and keep his self-respect together. but these perverts don't want us to be men. they want to make us soft sissies like these white fags you see all over the place. then they can take over—them and the white fags—and run everything. but we know. like bro stokely said, their place is prone. prone to the bone is the way i say it. now we know that throughout history a woman has always been weak. and there's a good reason. god intended for her to be weak and us to be strong. for us to protect her. but these women won't let us be men. they want to do everything we do. why these women even go into gambling holes now and demand to shoot craps and play poker. and they win too. any gambler will tell you a woman is bad luck when you tryin' to git money. her presence is negative. she makes us so we can't concentrate. asks too many questions. wants to know too much. do too much.

now this woman is holding us back. and this is not anything new. we all know this. it goes back to slavery. these women cooperated with the slavemaster to keep us in bondage. they let him steal their precious honeypots from us and in return we got all these little lightskinned bastards that weakened the race/blood. and she would do this in return for little favors and things. to make it easier for herself and harder for us. just like now all these women marrying whitemen. dinah ross and all those sick women like her. they nothing but whores! scumbags! waterbug eggs! sewer drains! and they're taking jobs away from us now. yeah. you see 'em driving trucks delivering mail and all kinda stuff.

now the time has come my fellow badniggas for us to take some action. we've got to stop their conspiracy with the enemy. do you hear me? how? very simple. we got to use what we got to get what we want. now not only do we got the joint—we is the joint. and the joint can put these women in line. yeah! a good fuckin' followed by an old fashioned asswhippin' oughta straighten these women right out. do you hear me? i said do you hear me?

## take #8

we are answering your questions in an essay so that we can better explain the history behind our answers. let us begin by saying our experiences have taught us that it is an enormous error to assume a person or group has revolutionary consciousness just because the person or group is oppressed. that's the error made by many of the whites who have been involved in the black struggle. especially we white women with black lovers or husbands.

we romanticized black people especially black men to a dangerous degree. we were running from the reality we learned growing up middle class, white and female. the reality we correctly diagnosed as patriarchal, imperialistic, authoritarian, anal, humorless, colorless, odorless, tasteless, boring and dangerous. patripower. the reality our white brothers are supposed to inherit from our fathers and we women are supposed to help perpetuate. instead of fighting it from our unique inside vantage point we ran to the people we saw as rebel/victims thinking their purity would shelter us. because of course we thought we needed sheltering.

we didn't see that the rebel/victims had absorbed patripower to such a degree they were actually reproducing it in each other and that this reproduction was undermining the very struggle we were determined to help build. we only saw their rebellious side. we didn't let ourselves see their other side. just like we only saw one side of ourselves — the rebellious side. we didn't see that we too had absorbed and were reproducing patripower.

what was holding us back was our belief that strategywise it's most important to fight outside oppressive forces: imperialism and racism, the vietnam war, etc. we saw the enemy as being outside of/removed from our pure selves. we ignored or denied our internal problems or said they'd be taken care of when "the most important struggle" had been won. but we could never get on with the "most important struggle" because this internal business was holding us back. we were embarked on an endless cycle of impotence.

it was our involvement with other women — particularly poor black women — that led to our awareness of the importance of internal business. through our conversations with these women who suffer class and race as well as sexual domination we learned that all men not just middle class white men use women, children and homosexuals to bolster their failing sense of masculinity when they are denied the so-called male right of economic domination.

we found that the stronger we became in our understanding of women's oppression the more hostile the rebel/victims became. as our understanding deepened our expectation of them and ourselves changed. we didn't want to be sheltered anymore. and when we stopped allowing the rebel/victims to display us as trophies in their war with our fathers for the rights to the patripower table we lost the rest of our already dwindling appeal.

now what usually happened at this point was the rebel/victims became sexually impotent. we were blamed. white women are frigid, they told us. (although they had not previously voiced any complaints in this area and although our sex drives remained constant.) suddenly these men saw they had made a serious mistake in becoming involved with white women. we couldn't meet their natural needs. they needed natural women who could restore their magical lost manpower and resurrect their frostily entombed manhood. white women move aside, we're going home to our roots, they proclaimed.

but when we began meeting these natural women — because of course the men insisted we meet their newfound exemplary models of womanhood — we found them surprisingly shallow. they saw themselves as having a sacred mission to reclaim their lost brothers to blackness. but their concept of blackness didn't include encouraging their brothers to reject the male privilege aspects of patripower. our true black sisters helped us understand that the models of womanhood were aspiring to the very roles we were trying to outgrow and destroy. oreo cookies (women's division) is the term our true black sisters used.

finally we had all the pieces in place. the rebel/victims were politically and sexually impotent because the aspects of their personalities and political philosophies that reflected the influence of patripower were holding back their development. as they saw patripower crumbling around them, as they saw their personal patripower trophies daring to applaud the crumbling and even helping it along, they panicked.

we are not surprised or alarmed by the HEW report. if anything it has not gone far enough in revealing the causes behind what it called the massive wave of impotence. but that's a job for black women. our group can only be of assistance in a secondary manner. however we are happy to provide that secondary assistance by answering your list of questions. if we can be of any further help please don't hesitate to call on us.

## take #7

let's come down to cases now. look. we've always let 'em think they was stronger than us and could fuck better. am i right? we let 'em think we are ashamed of being weak. am i right? that's how we got 'em into the cotton fields and rice fields and sugar cane fields and the mines and factories. chuckle. chuckle. chuckle. what's that? yeah. i realize i'm being

very frank. so what if those softies in the executive suite are gonna blow a gasket? this is no time to be namby pamby. we're all white men here. am i right? well. but as i was saying this is a hellified situation we got on our hands right now. yissir. things could get right messy let me tell you. if they can't fuck they might start fightin. and this time it'll

take more than a few well-placed "stray" bullets and a coupla poverty programs to calm 'em down. only thing i see for it is another war. yissir. a good ole juicy war. that'll take their minds off their dicks. if they wanna fight give 'em somebody other than us to point their guns at. maybe we'll send 'em to south africa this time. you know as well as i do that

south africa is the last frontier. that setup is sweeter than georgia peach cobbler. plenty gold, diamonds, uranium and plenty nigras to dig it all out the ground which means plenty profits for us. but now the nigras are striking and the nigra kids won't go to school. rioting and destroying property. guerilla attacks.

what's that you said? speak up. maybe our nigras won't fight them south african nigras? you mean because of that black identity stuff? listen here fella. let me tell you something. now you know i know how to handle 'em. been with 'em all my life. had me a bigmilk-titties mammy when i was a baby. now you listen to me. have i ever been wrong? they will do anything for money. anything. am i right? you guys thought they'd turn down the dope

sellin deal didn't you. said they'd never sell dope to their own kids. but what happened? see i know 'em! i know 'em!

and haven't they gone everyplace else we sent 'em? they fought the red skins out west, the mexes, the japs, the gooks in korea and vietnam. and that black stuff has died out anyway. i read it in ebony. we'll get dandy andy and ben crooks and big daddy ringinthenose to go on tv to spearhead the enlistment drive. and that one in nuyark? used to be a militant? what's his name? helped us get a bunch of 'em together to go to angola? naw. we won't have any trouble. all we have to do is tell 'em their manhood is on the line and dangle a little money. then give 'em a coupla black generals, some pimpsuit uniforms and we're home free. we'll call it

the war to make africa safe for democracy. make it sound like a liberation war or something. chuckle. chuckle. chuckle.

listen. i know 'em. they are revolution proof. well trained. tight pussy, loose shoes and a cadillac really is all they want. boy minnus! that's his name! get him on the phone. you liberals are always sweating. now you listen to me. have i ever been wrong?

besides. we are the white hope for the world now. you see what's happened in europe. they started getting soft and next thing you know the commies are taking over. kidnapping. bombing. striking. they're looking to us to save the game. we gotta show 'em we can deliver. our manhood is at stake for crying out loud!!!!!!!!!!!!

## take #10

to tell you the truth it's been so long since i had some i really have to stop for a moment and think about what i think about what you are calling a national crisis.

yeah. a long time ago i gave up counting on it or expecting it. gotta go through too many changes. men all want to reduce you to a lower (than them that is) common denominator. they gotta feel sorry for you or want to protect you or punish you or some weird shit like that in order to get it up. who wants to be bothered under those conditions?

and then when i started trying to talk to him about it telling him my head wouldn't compute those old signals anymore i started noticing the signs. then i knew what was going to happen. and it did. well at first i got scared and copped out to the old script—letting him reduce me so he could be big. but you know—it wouldn't work. i couldn't be the l.c.d. anymore. it was really funny cuz for a minute there i was in suspended animation. just hanging.

but then i decided i didn't have to be a slave to these desires i'd been programmed to have and that i would just wait til the time came when he could deal with me in a cooler way. no. i don't hate him. in fact i really feel for him. he's got a big adjustment to make after all. and he's so unprepared.

and then i thought about all the women who have had to do without it—sometimes for months and years at a time. what with wars, slavery, disease, jail, dope and whatnot. like in south africa. those sisters' case is much heavier than ours. their men have to go 100s of miles away from the bantustands where they are forced to live in order to find work. the government won't let the women go. they have to stay with their kids and old people on the bantustands which are even worse than the reservations the native americans are jammed up in over here. the men live at their jobs and they can only go home once or twice a year. they don't make no money so they hardly ever have any to send home to the bantustands. now what about those women? i mean that apartheid shit they have to deal with makes our shit look mild by comparison.

so i looked at the south african sisters and i said if they can do it so can i. i've learned other ways of feeling closeness. ways that aren't sexual and don't necessarily involve relating to men. i'll tell you something. i was surprised when i realized how much of my needs i expected to be filled by one person through an extremely limited range of experiences. isn't that a trip?

another advantage for me is that when he gets a hard time on his gig or something—you know his manhood is threatened? well now he'll have to find another way of dealing with that other than dragging some woman's ass across the floor and trying to fuck her through the mattress and box springs.

and who knows? if you give him enough time without an ass to drag and pound he might even get it together that he ought to turn that hostility back on its real source. and if that happens—wow! watch out!

hattie gossett. work herstory; babysitter asst playground attendant cook paid companion waitress secy cleaning person. "intro & 10 takes" and "yo daddy" are part of her own collection of writings titled *presenting sister noblues & the original wild & free wimmins jazz & blues desert caravan & fish fry* for which she is currently seeking an insightful and venturesome publisher.

# yo daddy!—an 80s version of the dozens

hattie gossett

-1-

yo daddy  
yo daddys daddy  
his daddy  
his great granddaddys great great granddaddys daddy  
yo daddy look like death ridin radar waves  
yo daddy walk like a broke dick dog  
yo daddy dips snuff wears a bowler hat and walks pintoed  
with a cane  
yo daddys breath smell like chemical fallout and industrial  
waste and hes always up in somebodys face  
yo daddys uncles brotherinlaw is havin a middleage crisis  
and is makin a fool outta hisself over young girls and his  
wife got tired of his shit and put him out  
yo daddys daddys daddys daddy was the slave who stayed  
behind when everybody else escaped to freedom talkin  
bout i aint gonna leave ma massa cuz he been so good  
to me

-2-

the employer who wants to pinch my ass and pay me less  
money than he would a man? his daddy  
the wifebeaters daddy  
the rapists daddy  
the childmolesters daddy  
the socialworkers and judges who say lesbians aint fit  
mothers? their daddies  
the slumlords daddy  
the industrial polluters? their daddies  
the committee in charge of cutting back social services? their  
daddies  
the stepup nuclear power production committee? their  
daddies  
all the other bigtime capitalists daddies  
and their smalltime neocolonial overseers daddies too  
like the chastity belt daddy  
and the drawing & quartering bonebreaking burning at the  
stake daddy  
and the madonna on the cross in a crisscross daddy  
and the polygamy daddy  
and the cliterectomy daddy  
and the foot bindin daddy  
and the child bride daddy  
and the chador and veil daddy

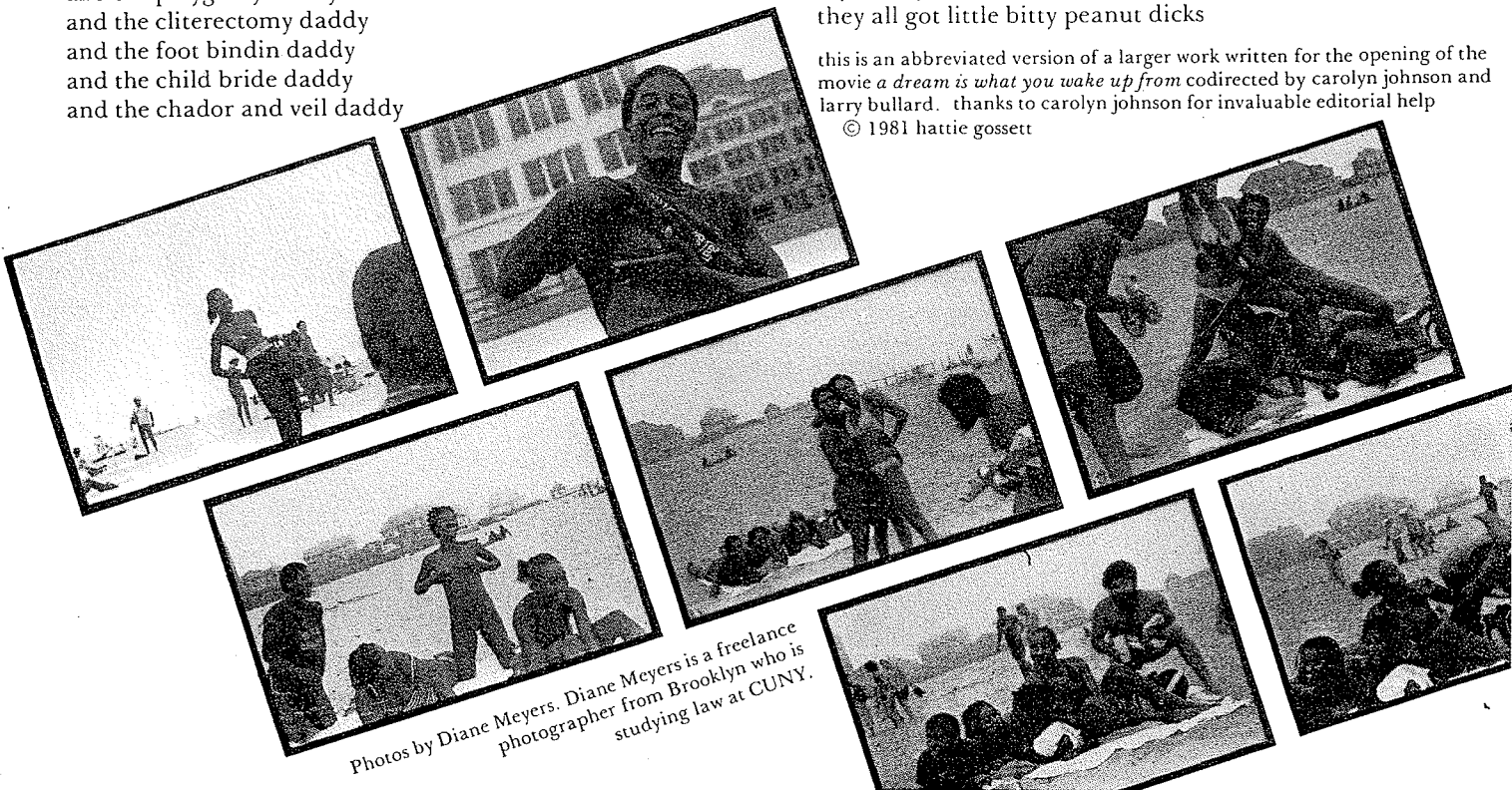
-3-

i dont haul no coal daddy  
i dont want nothin black but a cadillac daddy  
makin babies for the revolution he doesnt take care of daddy  
the womans position in the revolution is prone daddy  
speakin out about womens oppression in public but insistin  
on his patriarchal privileges in private daddy  
no foreplay daddy  
all technique and no feelins daddy  
yes i enjoy oral sex but i think cunnilingus is abhorrent and  
repulsive daddy  
yeah i want some head and naw i aint gonna eat no pussy  
daddy  
no stayin power daddy  
if i give you some money and some coke can i watch you and  
your girlfriend freak off daddy  
do you want to tie me up and beat me daddy  
can i tie you up and beat you daddy  
no technique daddy  
no warmth sensitivity gentleness tenderness either daddy  
roll over and go to sleep daddy

-4-

if a woman is not a profit to me shes a pain in the ass daddy  
a woman is like a pipe you gotta break em in daddy  
a menstruating lactating woman cant touch food enter holy  
places sleep in the house with or touch men daddy  
women are childlike sickly neurotic helpless incapable of  
serious thought son they will throw lye and cocacola on  
you while you sleep take yo money and make a fool outta  
you barbeque yo clothes slash yo tires put things in yo  
food bleed every month blow yo mind live longer than  
you daddy  
shes cute when shes mad daddy  
little girls should wear bouncy curls play passively with  
pinkpastyfaced dolls and with all their hearts and souls  
hope to die shonuff cross yo heart and open yo legs love  
their daddies daddy  
yo daddy  
my daddy  
they all got little bitty peanut dicks

this is an abbreviated version of a larger work written for the opening of the  
movie *a dream is what you wake up from* codirected by carolyn johnson and  
larry bullard. thanks to carolyn johnson for invaluable editorial help  
© 1981 hattie gossett



Photos by Diane Meyers. Diane Meyers is a freelance  
photographer from Brooklyn who is  
studying law at CUNY.

# simple truths

corbett with help from the criplets

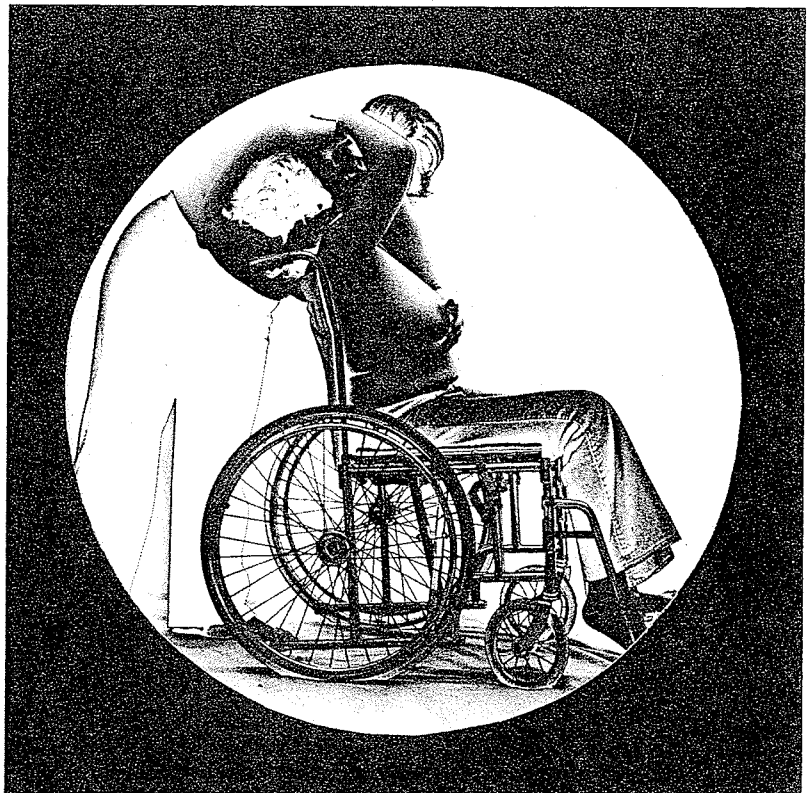
I.  
i am a woman full of myself  
    soft  
    full  
    powerful  
wanting  
often not getting  
i am a woman  
    lesbian  
    disabled  
    “But what does that mean?”  
they ask with rounded eyes  
trying to steal a glimpse of my soul  
    “What is your world like?”  
they imagine so many differences  
they do not believe the truth to be so  
    simple  
    “But how do they do it?”  
they always ask about the others  
the ones they see as more scary than i  
those with more equipment  
    less movement  
you cannot hear when i tell you  
cannot speak, for the words stick in your  
    mouth  
we are a family  
of women who are different  
yet so much the same  
    (as you)

II.  
the coming together  
melting of bodies  
woman to woman  
the words i know  
the feelings are mine  
but the pictures are all of you  
your not-different bodies  
we are the forgotten ones  
passed over  
    “We won’t be able to do things  
    together.”  
    “She’ll be too needy.”  
    “I won’t know what to do.”  
always the questions  
always the doubting  
so we whisper  
and they whisper  
we all wish it were easier  
we wish for lovers  
they for less guilt  
we try to say we’re all the same  
hide under our same lesbian banners

and for a while it works  
they like us, let us in  
but only to meetings  
seldom to bed  
they are afraid of us  
of our difference  
and when we find a lover  
we hide deeply in her  
she is our seal of acceptance  
we cherish her more than we wish to  
more than is good for us  
while we the family  
of women who are different  
who know from our souls we are  
    different  
try to love ourselves  
    ( anyway )  
we come together  
seeing ourselves in each other  
so little difference left  
we finally see the truth  
we are  
    full  
    strong  
    beautiful  
    women  
and they are afraid of us

III.  
i am a woman full of myself  
full of love for my beautiful crippled  
    body  
full of love for my disabled sisters  
i reject self-hatred  
i reject guilty doubting questions  
i reject all else except myself  
i am a woman full of myself  
i deserve to be loved  
so i love myself  
i deserve to be heard  
so i listen to myself  
i deserve to be seen and remembered  
i am a woman full of myself  
    woman  
    disabled  
    lesbian  
i am complete

corbett is a disabled woman from the San Francisco Bay Area.



Tee Corinne. *Study for a Book of Lesbian Erotic Images*. Solarized photo. Tee Corinne is a photographer living in Brooklyn.

# Butch-Fem Relationships

## Sexual Courage in the 1950's

Joan Nestle

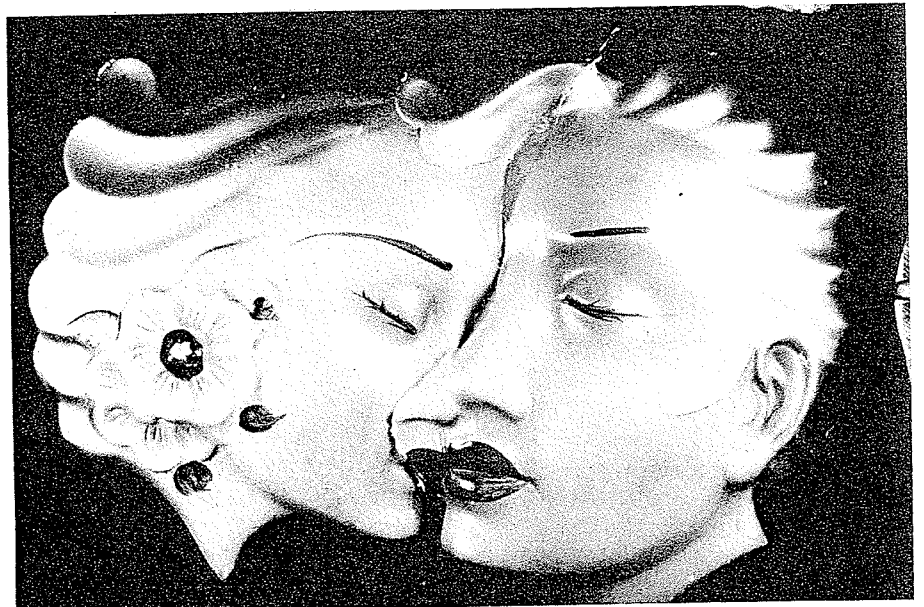
For many years now I have been trying to figure out how to explain the special nature of butch-fem relationships to Lesbian-feminists who consider butch-fem a reproduction of heterosexual models. My own roots lie deep in the earth of this Lesbian custom, and what follows is one Lesbian's understanding of her own experience.

In the late 1950's I walked the streets looking so butch that straight teenagers called me a bull-dyke; however, when I went to the Sea Colony (a working-class Lesbian bar in Greenwich Village, New York) looking for my friends and sometimes for a lover, I was a fem, a woman who loved and wanted to nurture the butch strength in other women. I am now 40 years old; although I have been a Lesbian for over 20 years and I embrace feminism as a world view, I can spot a butch 50 feet away and still feel the thrill of her power. Contrary to belief, this power is not bought at the expense of the fem's identity. Butch-fem relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply Lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, loving, courage, and autonomy. None of the butch women I was with, and this included a passing woman,<sup>1</sup> ever presented themselves to me as men; they did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility. Part of this responsibility was sexual expertise. In the 1950's this courage to feel comfortable with arousing another woman became a political act.

Butch-fem was an erotic partnership, serving both as a conspicuous flag of rebellion and as an intimate exploration of women's sexuality. It was not an accident that butch-fem couples suffered the most street abuse and provoked more assimilated or closeted Lesbians to plead with them not to be so obvious. An excerpt from

a letter by Lorraine Hansberry, published in *The Ladder*<sup>2</sup> in 1957, shows the political implications of the butch-fem statement; it is a plea for discretion because, I think, of the erotic clarity of the butch-fem visual image.

*Someday I expect the "discreet" Lesbian will not turn her head on the streets at the sight of the "butch" strolling hand in hand with her friend in their trousers and definitive haircuts. But for the moment it still disturbs. It creates an impossible area for discussion with one's most enlightened (to use a hopeful term) heterosexual friends.*<sup>3</sup>



Lesbian wall plaque (c. 1930)

A critic of this essay has suggested that what was really the problem here was that "many other Lesbians at that time felt that the adoption of culturally defined roles by the butch-fem was not a true picture of the majority of Lesbians; they found these socialized roles a limiting reality and therefore did not wish to have the butch-fem viewpoint applied or expressed as their own."<sup>4</sup> My sense of the time says this was not the reason. The butch-fem couple embarrassed other Lesbians (and still

does) because they made Lesbians culturally visible—a terrifying act for the 1950's. Hansberry's language—the words "discreet" and "definitive"—is the key, for it speaks of what some wanted to keep hidden: that is, the clearly sexual implications of the two women together. *The Ladder* advocated "a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society," and it was this policy Hansberry was praising. This desire for passing combined with the radical work of survival that *The Ladder* was accomplishing was a paradox created by the America of the 1950's. *The Ladder* was bringing to the sur-

face years of pain, opening a door on an intensely private experience, giving a voice to an "obscene" population in a decade of McCarthy witch hunts. To survive meant to take a public stance of societal cleanliness, but in the pages of the journal itself all dimensions of Lesbian life were explored, including butch-fem relationships. *The Ladder* brought off a unique balancing act for the 1950's. It gave nourishment to a secret and subversive life while it flew a flag of assimilation.

It was not the rejection by our own that taught the most powerful lesson about sex, gender, and class that butch-fem represented, but the anger we provoked on the streets. Since at times fems dressed similarly to their butch lovers, the aping of heterosexual roles was not visually apparent, yet the sight of us was enraging. My understanding of why we angered straight spectators so is not that they saw us modeling ourselves after them, but just the opposite—that we were a symbol of women's erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them. The physical attacks were a direct attempt to break into this self-sufficient, erotic partnership. The most frequently shouted taunt was: "Which one of you is the man?" This was not a reflection of our Lesbian experience as much as it was a testimony to the lack of erotic categories in straight culture. In the 1950's, when we walked in the Village holding hands, we knew we were courting violence, but we also knew the political implications of how we were courting each other and we chose not to sacrifice our need to heterosexual anger.<sup>5</sup>

The irony of social change has made a radical, sexual, political statement of the 1950's appear today as a reactionary, non-feminist experience. This is one reason why I feel I must write about the old times—not to romanticize butch-fem relationships but to salvage a period of Lesbian culture that I know to be important, a time that has been too easily dismissed as the decade of self-hatred. Two summers ago in Kansas at the Women's Studies Association Conference, a slide show was presented to the Lesbian caucus in which a series of myths about Lesbians was entertainingly debunked. The show was to be used in straight sex-education classrooms and for community organizations. One of the slides was a comic representation of the "myth" of butch-fem relationships, with the voice-over being something like: "In the past Lesbians copied heterosexual styles, calling themselves 'butch' and 'fem' but they no longer do so." I waited until the end to make my statement, but I sat there feeling that we were so anxious to clean up our lives for heterosexual acceptance that we were ready to force our own people into a denial of some deep parts of our lives. I knew what a butch or fem woman would feel seeing this slide show, and I realized that the price for social or superficial feminist accept-

ance was too high. If we deny the subject of butch-fem relationships, we deny the women who lived them and still do.

Because of the complexity and authenticity of the butch-fem experience, I think we must take another look at the term "role-playing," used primarily to summarize this way of loving. I do not think the term serves a purpose either as a label for or as a description of the experience. As a fem, I did what was natural for me, what felt right. I did not learn a part; I perfected a way of loving. The artificial labels stood waiting for us as we discovered our sexualities. We labeled ourselves as part of our cultural ritual, and the language reflected our time in history, but the words stood for complex sexual and emotional exchanges. Women who were new to the life and entered bars have reported that they were asked: "Well, what are you— butch or fem?" Many fled rather than



answer the question. The real question behind this was: "Are you sexual?" and when one moved beyond the opening gambits, a whole range of sexuality was possible. Butch and fem covered a wide variety of erotic responses. We joked about being a butch fem or a femmy butch or feeling kiki (going both ways). We joked about reversal of expectations: "Get a butch home and she turns over on her back." We had a code language for a courageous erotic world for which many paid dearly. It is hard to re-create for the 1980's what Lesbian sexual play and display meant in the 1950's, but I think it is essential

for Lesbian-feminists to understand without shame this part of their erotic heritage. I also think the erotic for us, as colonized people, is part of our social struggle to survive and change the world.

A year ago some friends of mine were talking about their experiences in trying to explain butch-fem relationships to a women's studies class. Both had been gay since the 1950's and were active in the early gay liberation struggles. "I tried to explain the complex nature of butch sexuality, its balances of strength and delicacy," Madeline said. "The commitment to please each other was totally different from that in heterosexual relationships in which the woman existed to please the man." As she spoke, I realized that not only was there the erotic statement made by the two women together but there was and still is a butch sexuality and a fem sexuality, not a woman-acting-like-a-man or a woman-acting-like-a-woman sexuality but a developed, Lesbian, specific sexuality that has a historical setting and a cultural function. For instance, as a fem I enjoyed strong, fierce lovemaking; deep, strong givings and takings; erotic play challenges; calculated teasings to call forth the butch-fem encounter. But the essential pleasure was that we were two women, not masqueraders. When a woman said, "Give it to me, baby!" as I strained to take more of her hand inside me, I never heard the voice of a man or of socially conditioned roles. I heard the call of a woman world-traveler, a brave woman, whose hands challenged every denial laid on a woman's life.

For me, the erotic essence of the butch-fem relationship was the external difference of women's textures and the bond of knowledgeable caring. I loved my lover for how she stood as well as for what she did. Dress was a part of it—the erotic signal of her hair at the nape of her neck, touching the shirt collar; how she held a cigarette; the symbolic pinky ring flashing as she waved her hand. I know this sounds superficial, but all these gestures were a style of self-presentation that made erotic competence a political statement in the 1950's. A deep partnership could be formed with as many shared tasks as there are now and with an encouragement of the style which made the woman I loved feel most comfortable. In bed the erotic implications of the total relationship only became clearer. My hands and lips did what felt comfortable for me to do. I did not

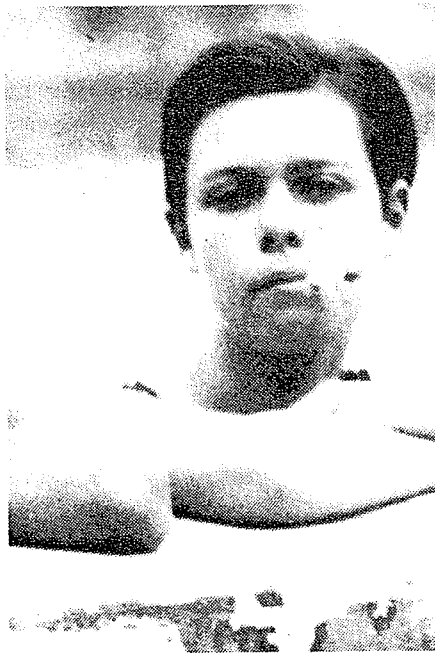


limit my sexual responses because I was a fem. I went down on my lovers to catch them in my mouth and to celebrate their strength, their caring for me. Deeper than the sexual positioning was the overwhelming love I felt for their courage, the bravery of their erotic independence.

As a way of ignoring what butch-fem meant and means, feminism is often viewed as the validating starting point of healthy Lesbian culture. I believe, however, that many Lesbians, pre-Stonewall, were feminists, but the primary way this feminism, this autonomy of sexual and social identities, was expressed was precisely in the form of sexual adventuring that now appears so oppressive. If butch-fem represented an erotically autonomous world, it also symbolized many other forms of independence. Most of the women I knew in the Sea Colony were working women who either had never married or who had left their husbands and were thus solely responsible for their own economic survival. Family connections had been severed or the families were poorer than the women themselves. These were women who knew they were going to work for the rest of their Lesbian days to support themselves and the home they chose to create. They were hairdressers, taxi drivers, telephone operators, who were also butch-fem women. Their feminism was not an articulated theory; it was a lived set of options based on erotic choices.

We Lesbians from the 1950's made a mistake in the early 1970's: we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture. The slogan "Lesbianism is the practice and feminism is the theory" was a good rallying cry, but it cheated our herstory. The early writings need to be reexamined to see why so many of us dedicated ourselves to understanding the homophobia of straight feminists rather than to understanding the life-realities of Lesbian women "who were not feminists" (an empty phrase which comes too easily to the lips). Why did we expect and need Lesbians of later generations and differing backgrounds to call their struggle by our name? I am afraid of the answer, because I shared both worlds and know how respectable feminism made me feel — how less dirty, less ugly, less butch and fem. But the pain and anger at hearing so much of my past judged unacceptable have begun to surface. I believe that Lesbians are a

people, that we live as all people do, affected by the economic and social forces of our times. As a people, we have always struggled to preserve our people's ways, the culture of women loving women. In some sense, Lesbians have always opposed the patriarchy; in the past, perhaps most when they looked most like men. This essay is not a full-grown analysis, but it is an attempt to shake up our prevailing judgments. We disowned our near past too quickly, and since it was a quiet past (the women in the Sea Colony did not write books), it would be easy not to hear it. Many women have said to me, "I could never have come out when you did." But I am a Lesbian of the 1950's, and that world created me. I sit bemused at Lesbian conferences, wondering at the academic course listings, and I know I would have been totally intimidated by the respectability of some parts of our current Lesbian world. When Monique Wittig said at



the Modern Language Association Conference three years ago, "I am not a woman, I am a Lesbian," there was a sharp gasp from the audience. But the statement made sense to me. Of course I am a woman, but I belong to another geography as well and the two worlds are complicated and unique.

The more I think of the implications of the butch-fem world, the more I understand some of my discomfort with the customs of the late 1970's. Once, when the Lesbian Herstory Archives presented its slide show of pre-1970 Lesbian images, I asked the women how many would feel comfort-

able using the word "Lesbian" alone without the adjunct "feminism." I was curious about the power of the hyphenated word when so few women have an understanding of the Lesbian 1950's. Several of the women could not accept the word "Lesbian" alone, and yet it stood for women who did stand alone. I suggest that the word "Lesbian-feminist" is a butch-fem relationship (as it has been judged, not as it was), with "Lesbian" bearing the emotional weight the butch does in modern judgment and "feminist" becoming the emotional equivalent of the stereotyped fem, the image that can stand the light of day. Lesbianism was theory in a different historical setting; we sat in bars and talked about our lives; we held hands in the streets and talked about the challenge of knowing what we were not permitted to do and how to go beyond that; we took on police harassment and became families for each other. Many of us were active in political-change struggles, fed by the energy of our hidden butch-fem Lesbian life, which even our most liberal left friends could not tolerate. Articulated feminism added another layer of analysis and understanding, a profound one, one that felt so good and made such wonderful allies that for me it was a gateway to another world—until I realized that I was saying "radical-feminist" when I could not say "Lesbian."

My butch-fem days have gifted me with sensitivities I can never disown. They make me wonder why there is such a consuming interest in the butch-fem lives of upper-class women, usually more removed literary figures, while real-life, working butch and fem women are seen as imitative and culturally backward. Vita Sackville-West, Jane Heap, Missy, Gertrude Stein, and Radclyff Hall are all figures who shine with audacious self-presentation, and yet the reality of passing women, usually a working-class Lesbian's method of survival, has provoked very little academic Lesbian-feminist interest. Grassroots Lesbian history research projects are changing this. The San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Men's History Research Project has created a slide show entitled "Lesbian Masquerade," which discusses passing women in San Francisco at the turn of the century. The Buffalo Lesbian Oral History Project (Madeline Davis, Avra Michelson, and Liz Kennedy) is focusing on the lives of pre-1970 working-class Lesbians. The Lesbian Herstory

Archives has a slide show in progress called "Lesbian Images Pre-1970." There are other groups in Boston, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and New York attempting to be more inclusive of the varieties of the Lesbian experience.

Because I quickly got the message in my first Lesbian-feminist CR group that such topics as butch-fem relationships and the use of dildos were lower class, I was forced to understand that sexual style is a complicated mixture of class, history, and personal integrity. My butch-fem sensibility also incorporates the wisdom of freaks. When we broke gender lines in the 1950's, we fell off the biologically charted maps. One day many years ago, as I was walking through Central Park, a group of cheerful straight people walked past me and said, "What shall we feed it?" The "it" has never left my consciousness. A butch woman in her fifties reminisced the other day about when she was stoned in Washington Square Park for wearing men's clothes. These searing experiences of marginality because of sexual style are crucial lessons.

Butch-fem women made Lesbians visible in a terrifyingly clear way in a historical period when there was no

movement protection for them. Their appearance spoke of erotic independence, and they provoked rage and censure both from their own community and straight society. Now it is time to stop judging and to begin asking questions and to begin listening. Listening not only to words which may be the wrong ones for the 1980's, but also to gestures, sadnesses in the eyes, gleams of victories, movements of hands, stories told with self-dismissal yet stubbornness. There is a silence among us, the voices of the 1950's, and this silence will continue until all of us are ready to listen. If we do, we may begin to understand how our Lesbian people survived and created an erotic heritage.

It has taken me 40 years to write this. The following women helped make it possible: Frances Taylor, Naomi Holoch, Eleanor Batchelder, Paula Grant, and Judith Schwarz, as well as the *Heresies* issue 12 collective; Paula Webster, who has said "do it" for years; and most deeply, Deborah Edell, my butchy Lesbian-feminist lover, who never thought I was a freak.

1. The word "passing" is used here for Lesbians who look like men to the straight world. They wear men's clothes and work at men's jobs (e.g., driving taxis or clerking in stock rooms). Language, however, is inadequate here. Neither "passing" nor "transvestism" adequately explains the experience of the passing woman. Only she can. In other places I use "passing" to mean disguising a deep identity for societal acceptance.

"Passing" in all its meanings is a central issue in Lesbian culture and deserves its own analysis. Michelle Cliff's *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Persephone Press) is a beginning.

2. *The Ladder*, published from 1956 to 1972 and edited by Gene Damon (Barbara Grier), was the most sustaining Lesbian cultural creation of this period. As a street fem living an unacceptable social life, I desperately searched the lower-East-side newspaper stands for this small slim journal with a Lesbian on its cover. A complete set is now available at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

3. *The Ladder*, No. 1 (May 1957), p. 28.

4. Letter from Sandy De Sando (August 1980).

5. An article in *Journal of Homosexuality* (Summer 1980), "Sexual Preference or Personal Styles? Why Lesbians Are Disliked" by Mary Riege Laner and Roy H. Laner, documented the anger and rejection of 511 straight college students toward Lesbians who were clearly defined as butch-fem. These results led the Laners to celebrate the withering away of butch-fem styles and to advocate androgyny as the safest road to heterosexual acceptance—a new plea for passing. This is the liberal voice turned conservative, the frightened voice of the 1980's that warns Blacks not to be too Black, Jews not to be too Jewish, and Lesbians not to be too Lesbian. To me, this is the basis for a truly destructive kind of role-playing—a self-denial of natural style so the oppressor will not get angry.

Joan Nestle is a founding member of the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation Inc. and the Lesbian Herstory Archives. She also teaches writing in the SEEK Program, Queens College, Flushing.



Deb and Joan. Photo by Morgan Gwenwald, 1980.

# IMPERSONALS

**WOMAN** looking for same or different, Call day or evenings. . . . .

**IS THERE SEX** after publication? Send for expensive pamphlet. Felicity, Pennsylvania. General Delivery.

**MARCH ON THE CAMERA DISTRICT:** Women against women against photography against women. Call Nilon for information.

**COME UNDRRESS** your inequities. Join your sisters any night at the Vulgar Vulva. E. 60's. Visit our new Les Mons room.

**LOST:** Humor (young and foolish). Vicinity of Spring and Lafayette. Some-time in the last 2 years. REWARD.

**GWSJF**, into EST, TM, TV, LSD, seeking M/F alphabetically compatible. EOE. Write PO.

**SEND** for unique mashed potatoes recipe. \$1.00 Box 000, Spring Street Station, NY.

**SNIFF THIS**-----X

**WANTED: A HAPPY ENDING.** Leave message with operator.

**SEX THERAPY WHILE-U-WAIT** Fairly licensed. Call out for information.

**VAGINO-AMERICAN** pot-luck dinner. Each lodge member allowed one guest. Watch for details.

**"HOLD THE PENIS,** hold the lettuce. Special orders don't upset us." Exclusively at your local Burger Queen.

# EDITORIAL

What does it mean to present a "realistic" view of female sexuality? Pieces that some women in the collective considered realistic were seen as "negativistic" by others. On the other hand, pieces that the latter women termed "realistic" were considered "romantic" by the others. While both groups were committed to presenting a realistic view, there was little agreement on what constituted it.

Underlying this controversy was a more basic difference of opinion about what the magazine's mission was. Was it to describe and analyze the sexuality of some women today—sexuality that is not so pretty, not so uplifting, not always something to be proud of in this era of "liberation"? Or was it to display a feminist sexuality which some women are presumably creating for themselves? (No one was so naive as to suggest that this new feminist sexuality was, by definition, lesbian sexuality or that the sexuality about which one might be embarrassed was, by definition, sexuality with men.)

We had many arguments about whether there is (or could be in this historical period) a feminist sexuality. If one can be a feminist at the office, in the political arena, over a cup of coffee with a friend, in therapy with a client, then why can't one be a feminist in bed? Some of us suggested that there was something intrinsically different about sex which might preclude it from being modified by the word "feminist." This *something* could be its privateness, its roots in infancy, its unique connection to repression.

We never arrived at a definition of feminist sexuality. It is a question we hope you will consider as you read this issue.

# EDITORIAL

To put out a magazine about female sexuality and exclude Third World women's perspectives would have been a contradiction. As the only Black woman in our collective, I felt that I was fighting the shackles of racism. There was a great deal of struggle within our collective to make sure that Third World pieces were included. Not only did I have to stick to my convictions about including Third World pieces, I had to make sure that the content was not distorted by a non-Third World woman via editing. The Third World visuals were also a big concern of mine. Throughout the two years of working with this collective, I kept a very close connection with my Third World sisters to make sure that I did not become "whitized" but kept a feminist Third World perspective.

Our backgrounds—political and sexual—shaped our views of the contents of this magazine. The Third World pieces are all political, tied to an international perspective of Third World women's struggles. Each piece, although the authors did not know each other, is connected in significant ways. My sisters validate my feelings, input, and perspective—just as it should be.



By Amy Stillman

# THE CELIBACY LETTERS

Dear Women:

September 1979

I've been thinking a lot about writing an article for the sexuality issue, because I have a perspective that I am afraid otherwise won't be included in the issue. But I can't create enough order in my thoughts or imagine an article format that wouldn't distort the thoughts. So a letter will have to do.

What I want to write about is celibacy as a viable sexual choice. Now, in my years of sexual activity, I would never have believed it if someone had told me that I would ever choose to be celibate for years. And yet, that has been one of the wisest, most self-affirming choices I have ever made. That decision (or rather, decisions, since I have made it again and again) has given me space to discover myself, to learn to love myself. I've developed a sense of my sexuality as a part of myself, rather than as a need that drives and consumes me, obliterating my self.


Making love to myself, I've learned that much of the power to make me feel and experience what I once gave to men (thinking they made me feel that way) in fact belongs to me, is a part of my own personal power—mine to own and exercise. Owning that power (which I don't think I ever could have done as long as I continued to relate sexually to other people) has given me the strength to begin to own my life, to build a life and center apart from all the patriarchal madness.

People ask me, "Don't you miss it? Don't you ever want a lover, someone's arms around you?" I can only answer that physical affection doesn't have to be restricted to sex, that I can hold and be held without "getting it on." Besides, one of the best things about long-term celibacy (say, more than six months) is that I don't get "horny" anymore. Of course, there are times when I feel sexual—then I can choose to masturbate or not—but I don't have that driven, gnawing need which can only be satisfied by another, often not available, person. When I have sexual dreams, I usually dream of my vibrator. People have a lot of trouble accepting or understanding this.

In fact, the biggest problem with celibacy is the reaction to it. Most people just don't believe it. Straights (men and women) assume, almost invariably, that what I mean when I say I'm celibate is that I don't sleep with men but am sexually active with women (somehow, in this view, sleeping with women doesn't count). Lesbians and gay men assume it's just a closet act, that I have a sexual relationship with the woman I live with and am too repressed to admit it. When I finally get people to accept the reality of it, everyone assumes (1) that it's really sad that I'm celibate, (2) that it's something I want to change or at least ought to want to change, and (3) that whatever emotional problems and struggles I have are because I am sexually repressed.

The heaviest social cost of celibacy, though, is that it keeps me on the fringes of the women's community. I consider myself woman-identified and woman-centered. If and when I choose to relate sexually to people again, it will almost certainly be with women. But I don't sleep with women now—I'm not waiting to get my courage up—I'm celibate. And passing as gay because it allows me to belong socially seems as wrong as passing for straight because it allows one to belong socially. If passing is wrong—as I believe it is—then it's wrong in all situations. But the condescension, pity, and pressure I usually meet in the lesbian community means that I don't feel accepted, and without acceptance there is no community for me. So, finally, I am lonely being celibate—not because I lack a lover but because women can't accept my choice and reality.

I would never presume that another woman should choose celibacy. But feminists have much to gain, as individuals and as a group, from more recognition and acceptance of celibacy as an option. It has been a growth situation for me and for the other women I know who are celibate. Celibacy allowed me to refuse to give my sexual energy and support to men. It allowed me to grow strong and free within myself. And when/if I become involved in interpersonal sex again, it will be with a clear sense of freedom and choice. And with a clear sense of myself as a woman—free and strong and whole. And that's what it's all about, isn't it?



Sandra M. Whisler

## THE CELIBACY LETTERS

Dear Sandra,

June 1980

We are very interested in publishing your letter; however, we had a few questions that we would like to see addressed in the piece since celibacy has not been well represented in the material that we have received. Because we think it is an important issue and one which needs to be addressed fully, we would like to see some areas in your letter expanded.

Your work stimulated a great deal of discussion among our collective members, gay and straight. All of us, at one time or another, have been celibate and have experienced the social pressure to define ourselves in terms of sexual object choice and activity. In light of our experiences and yours, we would like you to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways does masturbation bring us closer to ourselves?
2. Does all sexual interaction lead to obliteration of the self, and what is the nature and cause of this obliteration?
3. In what ways can women retain their sense of self and have sexual pleasure with others?
4. Why do our friends find celibacy so problematic?
5. Have there been changes in your relationship to the women's community since you wrote this letter?
6. Has your understanding of celibacy changed within the year?

Your response can take the form of another letter if you like that idea. Perhaps we could publish our interchange as "correspondence."

Yours,  
The Sexuality Issue

## THE CELIBACY LETTERS

Dear Women:

July 1980

I'm glad to be a part of this discussion of celibacy in the sexuality issue. I will try to respond to your points one at a time, but I want to emphasize that I can only say how it is for me.

1. How does masturbation bring me closer to myself? Some of these ways seem obvious: by providing myself with a positive sexual experience, by claiming for myself my own sexual power, by using masturbation as an opportunity to love myself. In the absence of the power plays and inequalities that can and often do happen in interpersonal sex, the act of giving myself orgasms becomes self-affirming and strengthening.

A couple of years ago I noticed that while I masturbated I often thought about my problems—especially situations in which I felt I had less power than other people (e.g., work). At first I was freaked—was I so obsessed with my problems that I couldn't even stop thinking about them during sex? But it didn't feel like a negative process. Eventually I realized that such thinking time is really productive—while masturbating, or in my dreams at night, I often find solutions that eluded me before, or new ways of looking at my problems. Somehow, when I masturbate, I am more in tune with my personal power; I identify more with my own woman strength. In this emotional geography, I can find a place of strength from which to operate in the troublesome situation. So masturbating is a way of providing a climate of self-love and affirmation, a place of strength and support for myself—an empowering act in my daily life.

over...

2. Does all sexual interaction lead to obliteration of the self? I don't know. It seems to me that orgasm involves a dissolution, or at least a blurring, of ego boundaries. In an interpersonal situation, that can lead to obliteration of the self—especially in a culture such as ours where we have all been so brainwashed by this romantic love garbage (two people merging into one self, being completed by one's true love, etc.). Given the mechanics of penetration, I suspect that heterosexual sex has an inherent tendency, at least, to obliterate the female self. I suppose that in a situation in which power was balanced and both lovers were really centered in themselves and had a genuine respect for one another, it would be possible to have sex which was not destructive of either woman's self. Perhaps because I found heterosexual sex so damaging, a mutually affirming situation is hard for me to imagine.

3. How can women retain their sense of self and have sexual pleasure with others? I don't know. If I did, I might be closer to ending my celibacy. Women who are maintaining their selfhood while active in interpersonal sex will have to answer this question.

4. Why do our friends find celibacy so problematic? Why are people ever threatened by other people making different choices and having different lives? Somehow, we have ended up with a notion of obligatory sexuality that is as rigid as the Victorian notion of chastity. Our phallogocentric culture defines interpersonal sex as a necessary aspect of healthy adult life, and most people—men and women—accept that judgment. Over the years, my close friends have come to accept my choice, and some of them can even see the virtues of it. But in a sexualized society like ours it's hard to convince people that celibacy is a healthy choice rather than a bad case of sexual prudery, repression, immaturity, or just plain neurosis.

In situations in the straight world in which there is no hope of people perceiving my celibacy as anything other than frustrated heterosexuality, I identify myself as a lesbian. But in situations in which there is some chance of women understanding where I am coming from, I try to be open about my choice, hoping to get women to think about celibacy.

5. Has my relationship to the women's community changed? The distancing I experience from many lesbians hasn't changed; I don't feel any more acceptable to gay women. But I'm more resigned—I've tailored my expectations to the reality of it. I see that part of the distance I feel comes from my own sense of alienation in reaction to the extreme expression of sexuality that I sometimes see at women's gatherings—a mode of acting and being that I perceive as being heavily based on the sexual objectification of other women.

I've learned to find a sense of connection with the larger women's community in movement literature, just as I would if I lived in an area which was geographically remote from centers of feminist culture. Once in a while I find a feminist who can understand and empathize with my choice, even though she may not choose it for herself. So I don't have the sense of longing and alienation that I did a year ago. But I still feel sad that I can't make my real life embody the sense of belonging and participation that I feel when I read Adrienne Rich.

6. Has my understanding of celibacy changed? I've become more aware of the price I pay for the space: celibacy does cut down on the physical affection I express and receive. As my sole source of sexual sensation, celibacy does get a little bit monotonous (like any sexual malaise, this one comes mostly from my own laziness and lack of imagination, I suspect). I occasionally find myself consciously attracted to another person.

But at this point, after almost six years, I still find celibacy a nurturing and self-enhancing choice. I don't feel frustrated, or hemmed in, or confined by my celibacy, but rather nourished and strengthened.

I feel a little bit nervous about publishing such a personal letter. But I still feel that it's important that celibacy be represented among the perspectives included in any discussion of sexuality among women. I think women have much to gain by perceiving celibacy as a real option in their lives, whether or not they ever actually become celibate. I want to share with other women the sense of freedom, space, and growth that celibacy can offer.

*Sandra M. Whisler*

Sandra M. Whisler

# EDITORIAL

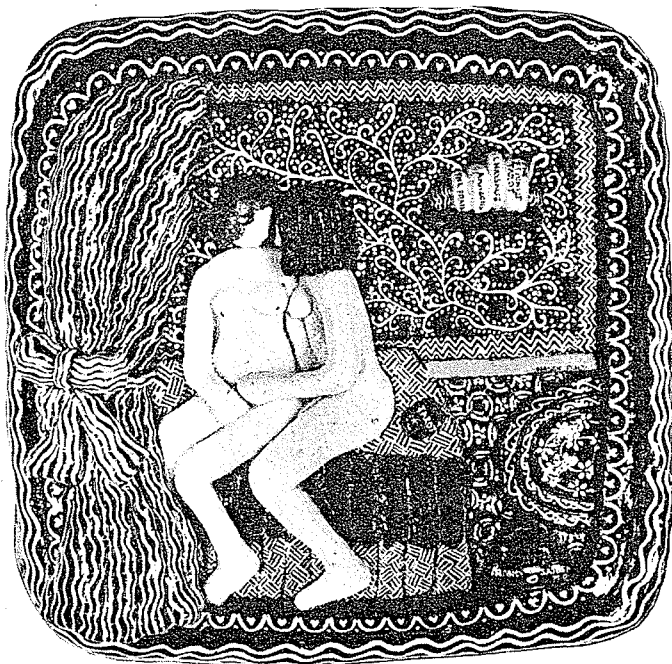
As two members of this collective, we hoped to work on an issue that by choice of materials attempted a dialogue between women. We feel that this dialogue is imperative at this time. It would have encouraged further progress in working out our sexual and political problems—in a sense, moving the private to the public domain. Within this issue, however, what we confronted was a feminine perspective that justified itself in the bogeys of its past. Sexual scapegoats, be they Mother, Father, Lover, or Censorial Feminist, seem capable of binding us to an indelible cycle of guilt, denial, frustration, and, finally, dismissal of the possibilities within ourselves. It is as if we had never considered “the personal is political.” Or as if that slogan were just another ill-starred hyperbole released during the sixties to float completely out of touch with the current of our lives.

Yet, for the two of us, it was the affirmation of that slogan that brought us to work on issue #12. Although we came from different sexual orientations, we were no less convinced that feminists had begun to dissolve the limitations of guilt and denial within themselves. Eliminating the crutches of hostility and anger, we looked to ourselves for our pleasure as well as pain. Thus, we recognized our power.

For many women, feminism fused our thoughts and focused our energy. It gave us working and available choices where there had been none. We spoke out from our isolation and acted on our own behalf. It was this effort that encouraged personal and political change. We challenged and criticized the separateness we were told must exist—one that paired us against each other, good girl versus bad, straight versus gay, race against race, government against all. This throwing

off of scapegoats was not without struggle (no simple adjustment of consciousness), but we realized that only we could determine the outcome of that struggle. It is this determination that is the crux of the argument for a feminist sexuality.

As a small minority within the collective, we were interested in hearing from women who had made the transformation to a self-generated sexuality—in their struggle and their ultimate pleasure. We did hear from them. But, more often than not, they seemed too euphoric—perhaps out of touch with sexual realities—within the framework of this issue. Always there were the other voices. Ultimately, it is those other voices that prevail in this issue. Yet we are convinced that feminism springs from the possibilities of our imagination rather than a recapitulation of the historical.



Nancy Fried. *Susan and Nancy* (1978). Dough and acrylic. 5" x 5". Photo by Maria Karras. Nancy Fried is an artist living in NYC.



Photo by Kay Kenny. Kay Kenny is an artist and photographer living in New Rochelle.

# FEELINGS

*I hope you only do those things in leather bars. If I ever saw women doing S/M in a lesbian bar, it would make me so angry I'd want to beat them up.*

— Anonymous gratuitous comment

Three years ago, I decided to stop ignoring my sexual fantasies. Since the age of two, I had been constructing a private world of dominance, submission, punishment, and pain. Abstinence, consciousness-raising, and therapy had not blighted the charm of these frightful reveries. I could not tolerate any more guilt, anxiety, or frustration, so I cautiously began to experiment with real sadomasochism. I did not lose my soul in the process. But in those three years, I lost a lover, several friends, a publisher, my apartment, and my good name because of the hostility and fear evoked by my openness about my true sexuality.

Writing this article is painful because it brings back the outrage and hurt I felt at being ostracized from the lesbian feminist community. I've been a feminist since I was 13 and a lesbian since I was 17. I didn't lose just a ghetto or a subculture—lesbian feminism was the matrix I used to become an adult. Fortunately for my sanity and happiness, I managed to construct a new social network. My friends and lovers are bisexual women (some of whom do S/M professionally), gay and bisexual men, and other outlaw lesbians. If I were isolated, I would not be strong enough to speak out about something that makes me this vulnerable.

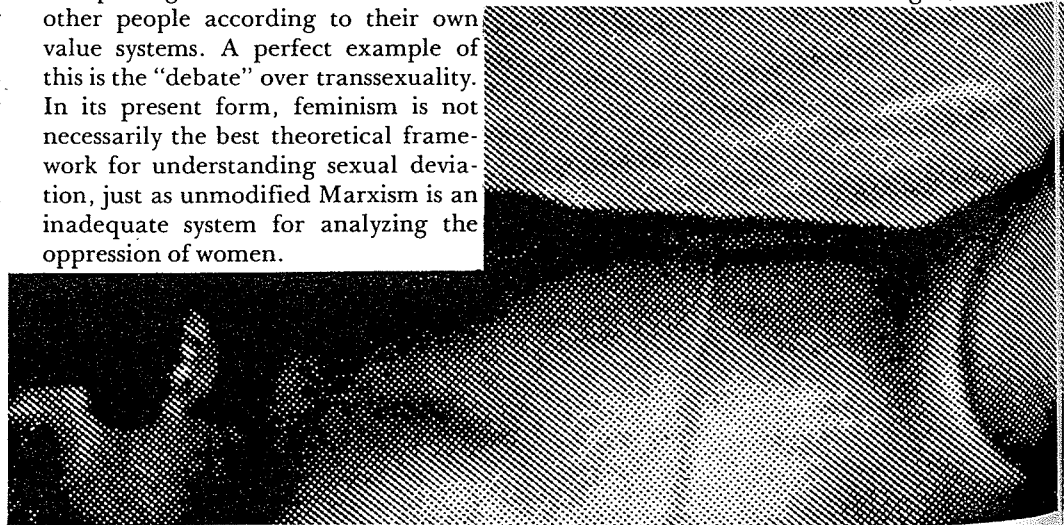
I describe my feelings about this issue because sadomasochism is usually dealt with in an abstract, self-righteous way by feminist theorists who believe it is the epitome of misogyny, sexism, and violence. In this article I shall examine sadomasochism in a theoretical way, and attempt a rapprochement between feminism and S/M. But I am motivated by my concern for the people who are frightened or ashamed of their erotic response to sadomasochistic fantasies. I don't want to hear any more tragic stories from women who have repressed their own sexuality because they think that's the only politically

acceptable way to deal with a yearning for helplessness or sexual control. I don't believe that any more than I believe homosexuals should be celibate so they can continue to be good Catholics. The women's movement has become a moralistic force, and it can contribute to the self-loathing and misery experienced by sexual minorities. Because sexual dissenters are already being trampled on by monolithic, prudish institutions, I think it is time the women's movement started taking more radical positions on sexual issues.

It is difficult to discuss sadomasochism in feminist terms because some of the slang S/M people use to talk about our sexuality has been appropriated by feminist propagandists. Terms like "roles," "masochism," "bondage," "dominance," and "submission" have become buzzwords. Their meanings in a feminist context differ sharply from their significance to S/M people. The discussion is rendered even more difficult because feminist theorists do not do their homework on human sexuality before pronouncing judgment on a sexual variation. Like Victorian missionaries in Polynesia, they insist on interpreting the sexual behavior of other people according to their own value systems. A perfect example of this is the "debate" over transsexuality. In its present form, feminism is not necessarily the best theoretical framework for understanding sexual deviation, just as unmodified Marxism is an inadequate system for analyzing the oppression of women.

Since the label "feminist" has become debased coinage, let me explain why I call myself a feminist. I believe that the society I live in is a patriarchy, with power concentrated in the hands of men, and that this patriarchy actively prevents women from becoming complete and independent human beings. Women are oppressed by being denied access to economic resources, political power, and control over their own reproduction. This oppression is managed by several institutions, chiefly the family, religion, and the state. An essential part of the oppression of women is control over sexual ideology, mythology, and behavior. This social control affects the sexual nonconformist as well as the conformist. Because our training in conventional sexuality begins the minute we are born and because the penalties for rebellion are so high, no individual or group is completely free from erotic tyranny.

I am not a separatist. I believe that men can be committed to the destruction of the patriarchy. After all, the rewards of male dominance are given only to men who perpetuate and cooperate with the system. I am not "woman-identified"—i.e., I do not believe that women have more insight,





# SADOMASOCHISM

PAT CALIFIA

intuition, virtue, identification with the earth, or love in their genes than men. Consequently, I cannot support everything women do, and I believe the women's movement could learn a lot from politicized or deviant men. On the other hand, I do not find it easy to work with men, partly because male feminist theory is pitifully underdeveloped. I do not think separatism is worthless or bankrupt. It can be useful as an organizing strategy and teaches women valuable survival skills. The taste of autonomy that separatism provides is intoxicating, and can be a powerful incentive to struggle for real freedom.

I think it is imperative that feminists dismantle the institutions that foster the exploitation and abuse of women. The family, conventional sexuality, and gender are at the top of my hit list. These institutions control the emotional, intimate lives of every one of us, and they have done incalculable damage to women. I cannot imagine how such drastic change can be accomplished without armed struggle, the appropriation and reallocation of wealth, and a change in the ownership of the means of production. When women are liberated, women will

probably cease to exist, since our whole structure of sex and gender must undergo a complete transformation.

The term "sodomasochism" has also been debased, primarily by the mass media, clinical psychology, and the anti-pornography movement. After all, homophobia is not the only form of sexual prejudice. Every minority sexual behavior has been mythologized and distorted. There is a paucity of accurate, explicit, nonjudgmental information about sex in modern America. This is one way sexual behavior is controlled. If people don't know a particular technique or lifestyle exists, they aren't likely to try it. If the only images they have of a certain sexual act are ugly, disgusting, or threatening, they will either not engage in that act or be furtive about enjoying it.

Since there is so much confusion about what S/M is, I want to describe my own sexual specialties and the sado-masochistic subculture. I am basically a sadist. About 10% of the time, I take the other role (bottom, slave, masochist). This makes me atypical, since the majority of women and men involved in S/M prefer to play bottom. I enjoy leathersex, bondage, various forms of erotic torture, flagellation (whipping), verbal humiliation, fist-fucking, and watersports (playing with enemas and piss). I do not enjoy oral sex unless I am receiving it as a form of sexual service, which means my partner must be on her knees, on her back, or at least in a collar. I have non-S/M sex rarely, mostly for old times' sake, with vanilla friends\* I want to stay

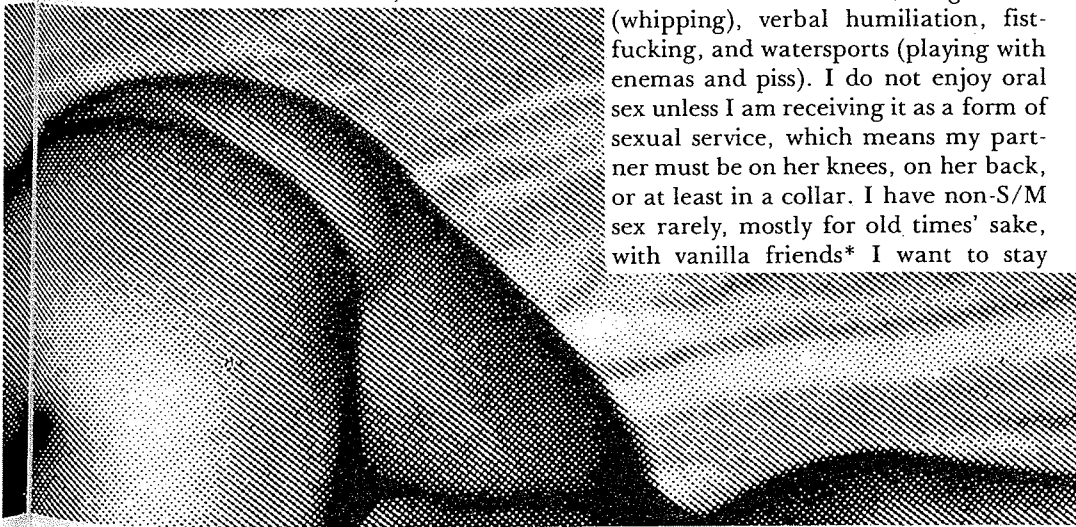
close to. My primary relationship is with a woman who enjoys being my slave. We enjoy tricking with other people and telling each other the best parts afterward.

Because sodomasochism is usually portrayed as a violent, dangerous activity, most people do not think there is a great deal of difference between a rapist and a bondage enthusiast. Sodomasochism is not a form of sexual assault. It is a consensual activity that involves polarized roles and intense sensations. An S/M scene is always preceded by a negotiation in which the top and bottom decide whether or not they will play, what activities are likely to occur, what activities will not occur, and about how long the scene will last. The bottom is usually given a "safe word" or "code action" she can use to stop the scene. This safe word allows the bottom to enjoy a fantasy that the scene is not consensual, and to protest verbally or resist physically without halting stimulation.

The key word to understanding S/M is *fantasy*. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual. The participants are enhancing their sexual pleasure, not damaging or imprisoning one another. A sodomasochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the sum total of her being.

S/M relationships are usually egalitarian. Very few bottoms want a full-time mistress. In fact, the stubbornness and aggressiveness of the masochist is a byword in the S/M community. Tops often make nervous jokes about being slaves to the whims of their bottoms. After all, the top's pleasure is dependent on the bottom's willingness to play. This gives most sadists a mild-to-severe case of performance anxiety.

The S/M subculture is a theater in which sexual dramas can be acted out



and appreciated. It also serves as a vehicle for passing on new fantasies, new equipment, warnings about police harassment, introductions to potential sex partners and friends, and safety information. Safety is a major concern of sadomasochists. A major part of the sadist's turn-on consists of deliberately altering the emotional or physical state of the bottom. Even a minor accident like a rope burn can upset the top enough to mar the scene. And, of course, a bottom can't relax and enjoy the sex if she doesn't completely trust her top. The S/M community makes some attempt to regulate itself by warning newcomers away from individuals who are inconsiderate, insensitive, prone to playing when they are intoxicated, or unsafe for other reasons. The suppression of S/M isolates novice sadists and masochists from this body of information, which can make playing more rewarding and minimize danger.

For some people, the fact that S/M is consensual makes it acceptable. They may not understand why people enjoy it, but they begin to see that S/M people are not inhumane monsters. For other people, including many feminists, the fact that it is consensual makes it even more appalling. A woman who deliberately seeks out a sexual situation in which she can be helpless is a traitor in their eyes. Hasn't the women's movement been trying to persuade people for years that women are not naturally masochistic?

Originally, this slogan meant that women do not create their own second-class status, do not enjoy it, and are the victims of socially constructed discrimination, not biology. A sexual masochist probably doesn't want to be raped, battered, discriminated against on her job, or kept down by the system. Her desire to act out a specific sexual fantasy is very different from the pseudopsychiatric dictum that a woman's world is bound by housework, intercourse, and childbirth.

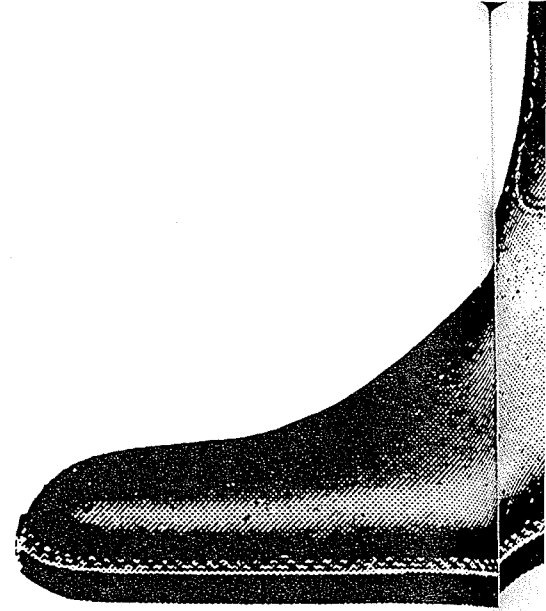
Some feminists object to the description of S/M as consensual. They believe that our society has conditioned all of us to accept inequities in power and hierarchical relationships. Therefore, S/M is simply a manifestation of the same system that dresses girls in pink and boys in blue, allows surplus value to accumulate in the coffers of capitalists and gives workers a minimum wage, and sends cops out to keep the disfranchised down.

It is true, as I stated before, that

society shapes sexuality. We can make any decision about our sexual behavior we like, but our imagination and ability to carry out those decisions are limited by the surrounding culture. But I do not believe that sadomasochism is the result of institutionalized injustice to a greater extent than heterosexual marriage, lesbian bars, or gay male bathhouses. The system is unjust because it assigns privileges based on race, gender, and social class. During an S/M encounter, the participants select a particular role because it best expresses their sexual needs, how they feel about a particular partner, or which outfit is clean and ready to wear. The most significant reward for being a top or a bottom is sexual pleasure. If you don't like being a top or a bottom, you switch your keys. Try doing that with your biological sex or your race or your socioeconomic status. The S/M subculture is affected by sexism, racism, and other fallout from the system, but the dynamic between a top and a bottom is quite different from the dynamic between men and women, whites and Blacks, or upper- and working-class people. The roles are acquired and used in very different ways.

Some feminists still find S/M roles disturbing, because they believe they are derived from genuinely oppressive situations. They accuse sadomasochism of being fascistic because of the symbolism employed to create an S/M ambiance. And some S/M people do enjoy fantasies that are more elaborate than a simple structure of top versus bottom. An S/M scene can be played out using the personae of guard and prisoner, cop and suspect, Nazi and Jew, white and Black, straight man and queer, parent and child, priest and penitent, teacher and student, whore and client, etc.

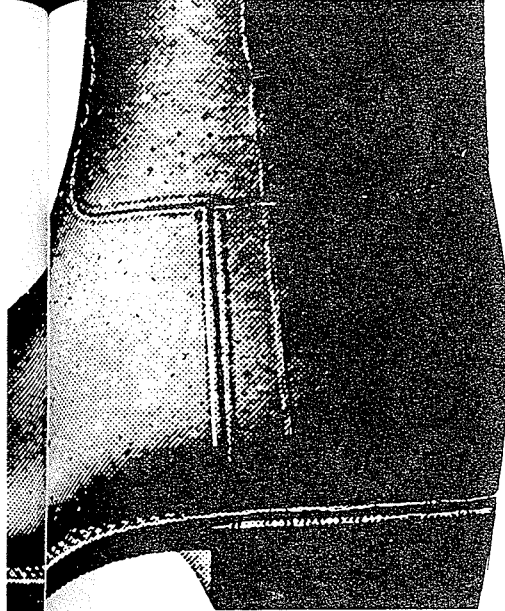
However, no symbol has a single meaning. Its meaning is derived from the context in which it is used. Not everyone who wears a swastika is a Nazi, not everyone who has a pair of handcuffs on his belt is a cop, and not everyone who wears a nun's habit is a Catholic. S/M is more a parody of the



hidden sexual nature of fascism than it is a worship of or acquiescence to it. How many real Nazis, cops, priests, or teachers would be involved in a kinky sexual scene? It is also a mistake to assume that the historical oppressor is always the top in an S/M encounter. The child may be chastising the parent, the prisoner may have turned the tables on the cop, and the queer may be forcing the straight man to confront his sexual response to other men. The dialogue in some S/M scenes may sound sexist or homophobic from the outside, but its real meaning is probably neither. A top can call his bottom a cocksucker to give him an instruction (i.e., indicate that the top wants oral stimulation), encourage him to lose his inhibitions and perform an act he may be afraid of, or simply acknowledge shame and guilt and use it to enhance the sex act rather than prevent it.

S/M eroticism focuses on whatever feelings or actions are forbidden, and searches for a way to obtain pleasure from the forbidden. It is the quintessence of nonreproductive sex. Those feminists who accuse sadomasochists of mocking the oppressed by playing with dominance and submission forget that *we* are oppressed. We suffer police harassment, violence in the street, discrimination in housing and in employment. We are not treated the way our system treats its collaborators and supporters.

The issue of pain is probably as difficult for feminists to understand as polarized roles. We tend to associate pain with illness or self-destruction. First of all, S/M does not necessarily involve pain. The exchange of power is more essential to S/M than intense sensation, punishment, or discipline. Second, pain is a subjective experience. Depending on the context, a certain



sensation may frighten you, make you angry, urge you on, or get you hot. People choose to endure pain or discomfort if the goal they are striving for makes it worthwhile. Long-distance runners are not generally thought of as sex perverts, nor is St. Theresa. The fact that masochism is disapproved of when stressful athletic activity and religious martyrdom are not is an interesting example of the way sex is made a special case in our society. We seem to be incapable of using the same reason and compassion we apply to non-sexual issues to formulate our positions on sexual issues.

S/M violates a taboo that preserves the mysticism of romantic sex. Any pain involved is deliberate. Aroused human beings do not see, smell, hear, taste, or perceive pain as acutely as the nonaroused individual. Lots of people find bruises or scratches the morning after an exhilarating session of love-making and can't remember exactly how or when they got them. The sensations involved in S/M are not that different. But we're supposed to fall into bed and do it with our eyes closed. Good, enthusiastic sex is supposed to happen automatically between people who love each other. If the sex is less than stunning, we tend to blame the quality of our partner's feelings for us. Planning a sexual encounter and using toys or equipment to produce specific feelings seems antithetical to romance.

What looks painful to an observer is probably being perceived as pleasure, heat, pressure, or a mixture of all these by the masochist. A good top builds sensation slowly, alternates pain with pleasure, rewards endurance with more pleasure, and teaches the bottom to transcend her own limits. With enough preparation, care, and encouragement, people are capable of

doing wonderful things. There is a special pride which results from doing something unique and extraordinary for your lover. The sadomasochist has a passion for making use of the entire body, every nerve fiber, and every wayward thought.

Recently, I have heard feminists use the term "fetishistic" as an epithet and a synonym for "objectifying." Sadomasochists are often accused of substituting things for people, of loving the leather or rubber or spike heels more than the person who is wearing them. Objectification originally referred to the use of images of stereotypically feminine women to sell products like automobiles and cigarettes. It also referred to the sexual harassment of women and the notion that we should be available to provide men with sexual gratification without receiving pleasure in return and without the right to refuse to engage in sex. A concept which was originally used to attack the marketing campaigns of international corporations and the sexual repression of women is now being used to attack a sexual minority.

Fetish costumes are worn privately or at S/M gatherings. They are as unacceptable to employers and advertising executives as a woman wearing overalls and smoking a cigar. Rather than being part of the sexual repression of women, fetish costumes can provide the women who wear them with sexual pleasure and power. Even when a fetish costume exaggerates the masculine or feminine attributes of the wearer, it cannot properly be called sexist. Our society strives to make masculinity in men and femininity in women appear natural and biologically determined. Fetish costumes violate this rule by being too theatrical and deliberate. Since fetish costumes may also be used to transform the gender of the wearer, they are a further violation of sexist standards for sex-specific dress and conduct.

The world is not divided into people who have sexual fetishes and people who don't. There is a continuum of response to certain objects, substances, and parts of the body. Very few people

are able to enjoy sex with anyone, regardless of their appearance. Much fetishism probably passes as "normal" sexuality because the required cues are so common and easy to obtain that no one notices how necessary they are.

Human sexuality is a complicated phenomenon. A cursory examination will not yield the entire significance of a sexual act. Fetishes have several qualities which make them erotically stimulating and unacceptable to the majority culture. Wearing leather, rubber, or a silk kimono distributes feeling over the entire skin. The isolated object may become a source of arousal. This challenges the identification of sex with the genitals. Fetishes draw all the senses into the sexual experience, especially the sense of smell and touch. Since they are often anachronistic or draw attention to erogenous zones, fetish costumes cannot be worn on the street. Fetishes are reserved for sexual use only, yet they are drawn from realms not traditionally associated with sexuality. Fetishism is the product of imagination and technology.

Sadomasochism is also accused of being a hostile or angry kind of sex, as opposed to the gentle and loving kind of sex that feminists should strive for. The women's movement has become increasingly pro-romantic love in the last decade. Lesbians are especially prone to this sentimental trend. Rather than being critical of the idea that one can find enough fulfillment in a relationship to justify one's existence, feminists are seeking membership in a perfect, egalitarian couple. I question the value of this.

There is no concrete evidence that the childhoods of sadomasochists contained any more corporal punishment, puritanism, or abuse than the childhoods of other people. There is also no evidence that we secretly fear and hate our partners. S/M relationships vary from no relationship at all (the S/M is experienced during fantasy or masturbation) to casual sex with many partners to monogamous couples, and include all shades in between. There are many different ways to express affection or sexual interest. Vanilla people send flowers, poetry, or candy, or they exchange rings. S/M people do all that, and may also lick boots, wear a locked collar, or build their loved one a rack in the basement. There is little objective difference between a feminist who is offended by the fact that my lover kneels to me in public and sub-

urbanites calling the cops because the gay boys next door are sunbathing in the nude. My sexual semiotics differ from the mainstream. So what? I didn't join the feminist movement to live inside a Hallmark greeting card.

Is there a single controversial sexual issue that the women's movement has not reacted to with a conservative, feminine horror of the outrageous and the rebellious? A movement that started out saying biology is *not* destiny is trashing transsexuals and celebrating women's "natural" connection to the earth and living things. A movement that spawned children's liberation is trashing boy-lovers and supporting the passage of draconian sex laws that assign heavier sentences for having sex with a minor than you'd get for armed robbery. A movement that developed an analysis of housework as unpaid labor and acknowledged that women usually trade sex for what they want because that's all they've got is joining the vice squad to get prostitutes off the street. A movement whose early literature was often called obscene and banned from circulation is campaigning to get rid of pornography. The only sex perverts this movement stands behind are lesbian mothers, and I suspect that's because of the current propaganda about women being the nurturing, healing force that will save the world from destructive male energy.

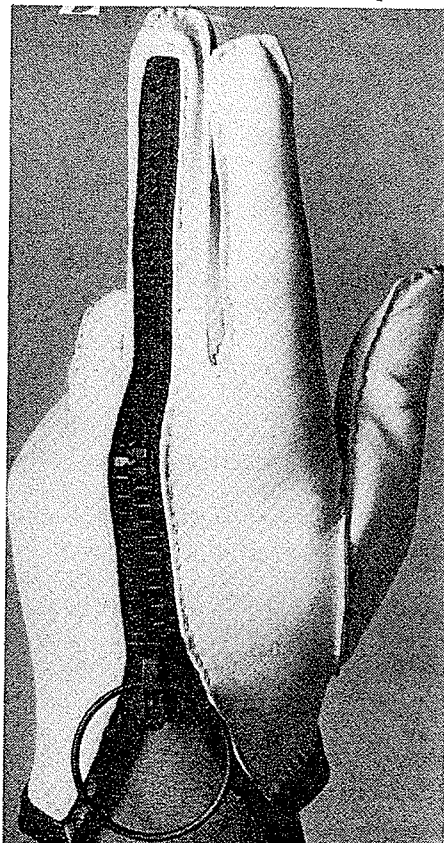
Lesbianism is being desexualized as fast as movement dykes can apply the whitewash. We are no longer demanding that feminist organizations acknowledge their lesbian membership. We are pretending that the words "feminist" and "woman" are synonyms for "lesbian."

The anti-pornography movement is the best of the worst of the women's movement, and it must take responsibility for much of the bigotry circulating in the feminist community. This movement has consistently refused to take strong public positions supporting sex education, consenting-adult legislation, the right to privacy, the decriminalization of prostitution, children's and adolescents' rights to sexual information and freedom, and the First Amendment. It has encouraged violence against sexual minorities, especially sadomasochists, by slandering sexual deviation as violence against women. Their view of S/M is derived from one genre of commercial pornography (male-dominant and female-submissive) and makes Krafft-Ebing look like a liberal.

Commercial pornography distorts all forms of sexual behavior. There are several reasons for this. One is that it is designed to make money, not to educate people or be aesthetically pleasing. The other is that it is quasi-legal, and thus must be produced as quickly and surreptitiously as possible. Another reason is that erotic material is intended to gratify fantasy, not serve as a model for actual behavior.

S/M pornography can be divided into several types, each designed for a different segment of the S/M subculture. Most of it represents women dominating and disciplining men, since the largest market for S/M porn is heterosexual submissive males. Very little S/M porn shows any actual physical damage or even implies that damage is occurring. Most of it depicts bondage, or tops dressed in fetish costumes and assuming threatening poses.

Very little S/M porn is well produced or informative. But eliminating it will have the effect of further impoverishing S/M culture and isolating sadomasochists from one another, since many of us make contact via personal ads carried in pornographic magazines. The excuse for banning "violent" porn is that this will end violence against women. The causal connection is dubious. It is indisputably true that very few people who consume pornography ever assault or rape an-



other person. When a rape or assault is committed, it usually occurs after some forethought and planning. But legally, a free society must distinguish between the fantasy or thought of committing a crime and the actual crime. It is not a felony to fantasize committing an illegal act, and it should not be, unless we want our morals regulated by the Brain Police. Banning S/M porn is the equivalent of making fantasy a criminal act. Violence against women will not be reduced by increasing sexual repression. People desperately need better information about sex; more humanistic and attractive erotica; more readily available birth control, abortion, and sex therapy; and more models for nontraditional, nonexploitative relationships.

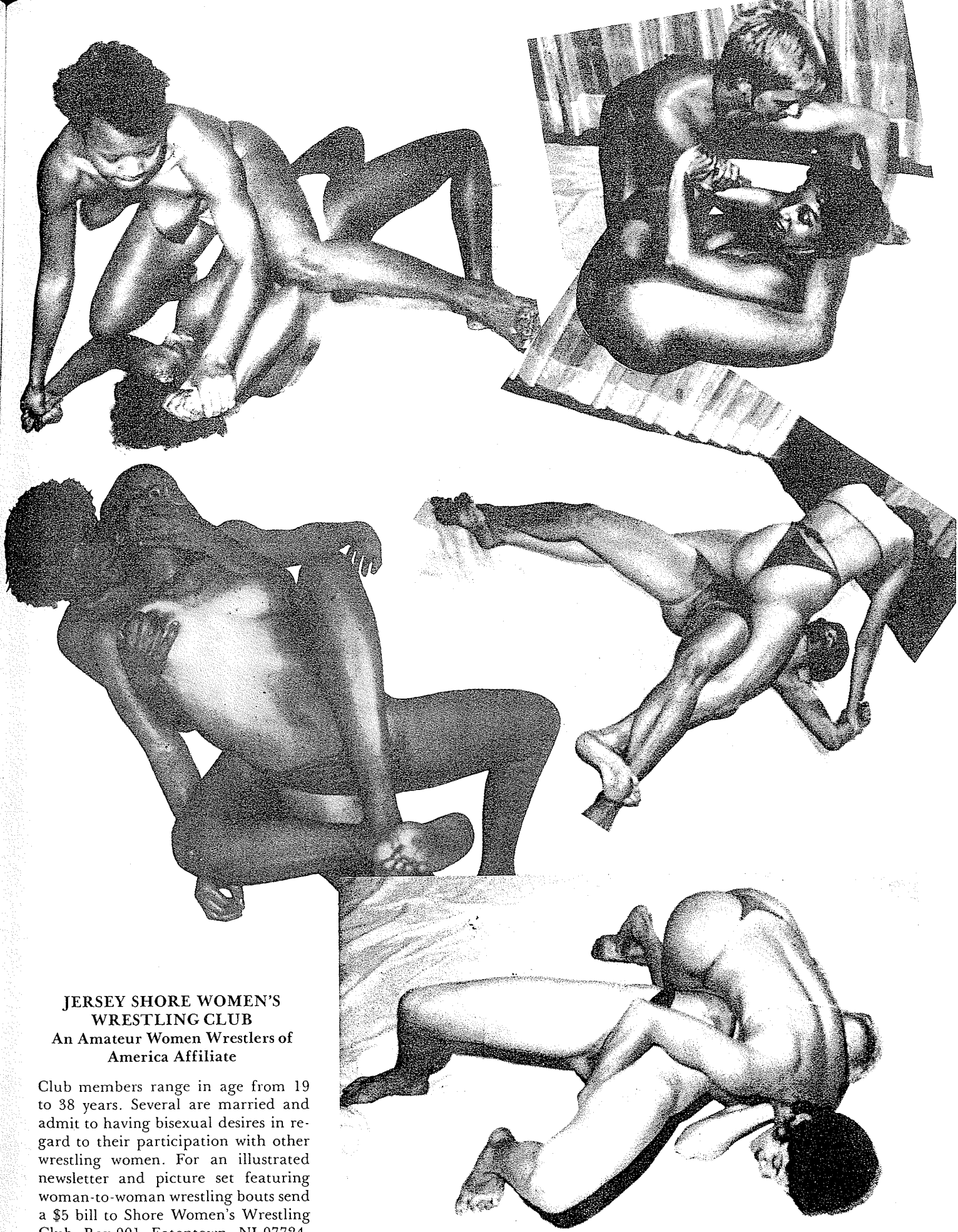
I am often asked if sadomasochism will survive the revolution. I think all the labels and categories we currently use to describe ourselves will change dramatically in the next 100 years, even if the revolution does not occur. My fantasy is that kinkiness and sexual variation will multiply, not disappear, if terrible penalties are no longer meted out for being sexually adventurous.

There is an assumption behind the question that bothers me. The assumption that sadomasochists are part of the system rather than part of the rebellion has already been dealt with in this article. But there is another assumption—that we must enjoy being oppressed and mistreated. We like to wear uniforms? Then we must get off on having cops bust up our bars. We like to play with whips and nipple clamps and hot wax? Then it must turn us on when gangs of kids hunt us down, harass and beat us. We're not really human. We're just a bunch of leather jackets and spike heels, a bunch of post office boxes at the bottom of sex ads.

*We make you uncomfortable, partly because we're different, partly because we're sexual, and partly because we're not so different. I'd like to know when you're going to quit blaming us, the victims of sexual repression, for the oppression of women. I'd like to know when you're going to quit objectifying us.*

\*Vanilla is to S/M what straight is to gay. I don't use the term as a pejorative, but because I believe sexual preferences are more like flavor preferences than like moral/political alliances.

Pat Califia has been involved in the lesbian-feminist movement for 10 years. She has led workshops for lesbians on sex education and written *Sapphisty*, a lesbian sex manual.



**JERSEY SHORE WOMEN'S  
WRESTLING CLUB**  
An Amateur Women Wrestlers of  
America Affiliate

Club members range in age from 19 to 38 years. Several are married and admit to having bisexual desires in regard to their participation with other wrestling women. For an illustrated newsletter and picture set featuring woman-to-woman wrestling bouts send a \$5 bill to Shore Women's Wrestling Club, Box 901, Eatontown, NJ 07724.

# VENUS

SEPH WEENE

I used to be a stripper.

When I got my first job as an emergency economic measure, I'd never even seen one. I found I loved the work. I stayed with it for years, learned to do it well, made it my art and my profession. But I always wondered how it was that I had taken to it so easily, did it so well, found it so fulfilling. What did it say about me, when, as an avowed feminist, I was so involved in a quintessentially sexist business? Where were those things I did on stage coming from? In real life, my sexual overtures were covert, or verbal: my clothes, jeans and sneakers. I worried. Was I crazy, a repressed pervert, a closet glamour girl? I came to see, however, that my love of striptease had less to do with any personal kinks than with the distortion of female sexuality in our culture.

It all began to make sense to me one night as I watched another stripper perform. A big woman, with a stage presence that indicated dance and theater training—I admired her style, the way she played to the audience. She seemed bigger than life. I suddenly realized that what was at issue between us performers and the audience was power. The men came, some of them, to suffer; their attitude was: "She is making me horny, but I'll never have her." To them, the show was exquisite frustration, the sexy woman on stage, a tormentor. The other group of men came to pull imaginary strings; they saw themselves as masters, thinking: "I'm paying for this, she has to do

those dirty things for me." In other words, some of the men fantasized themselves as passive, others as dominant.

Later, I saw the situation as less clear-cut. Many of the men felt both ways at once, and some had less extreme feelings. Their specific configuration didn't matter to me or to any other stripper, so long as they paid attention. We wanted control. They wanted a sexual thrill with no personal effort, and yielded all responsibility to the woman on stage. The stripper was the single dynamic force in a room full of passive people. The male attitude was also a challenge: "Make me respond, make me feel something—I dare you." We were adversaries, worthy opponents in a sexual power game.

The thrill I got from stripping was power. I was seen as powerful; more important, I felt powerful. Alive and free, I reveled in my body, my beauty, the dance, the drama, my own glorious energy. My whole being was totally engaged; I was radiant. The connection between repression of overt sexuality and male-dominated societies has been made elsewhere. I think our culture discourages simple freedom of movement even more than sexuality. How many places can you go to exercise anything but your mouth without being labeled odd? As a stripper, I was getting a taste of what it would be like to be a woman in a society that honors the animal vitality in us all, instead of despising it.

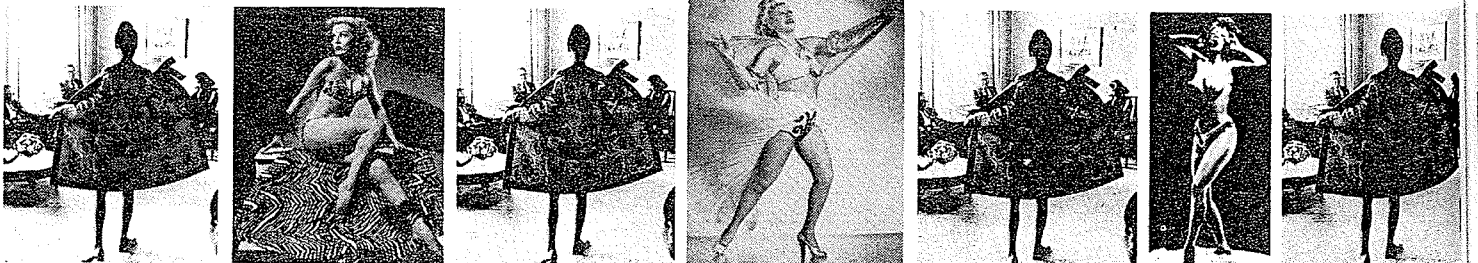
I was not getting to feel so good for

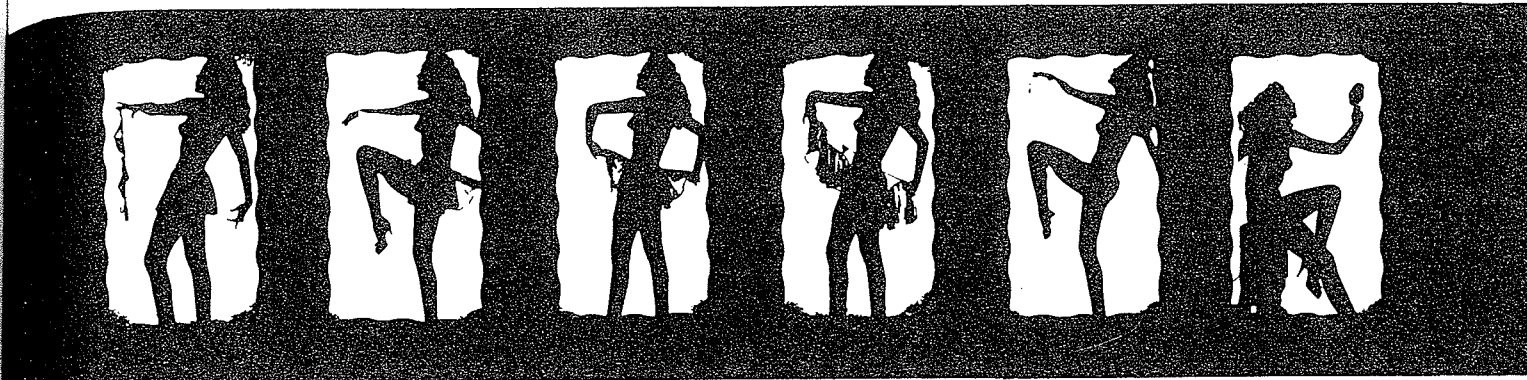
free. I paid in the usual currency—sexuality. What keeps women from moving, glowing, being like that in ordinary life is precisely that whatever we do will be seen as sexual. It is infuriating, demoralizing. It is different for a stripper. She is being sexy on purpose, the initiator, not the victim. Not walking down the street hunched over lest some man think she wears her sweater for his delectation, but thrusting bare breasts under his very nose.

And he can't touch her. The stripper is inviolable. That stage is hassle-free. For one thing, there is a boundary between any performer and audience that few dare cross. For another, the man watching striptease thinks that any response from him is a point for the opposition. The stripper is trying to make him respond; to show he is moved is to openly grant her power. The game has silly, sexist rules, but a woman can win it. We are taught to fear the sexual arousal of men. When a stripper's show is going well, the air is thick, charged with sexuality, and she is in total control.

This pleasant feeling of immunity is close to contempt. As in the fantasy of the passive man, the stripper takes pleasure in being a tormentor. While I think all of us strippers felt some disdain for men, the only women I ever heard admit to feeling that pleasure were the gay women.

Ordinary restrictions on women's behavior did not apply on that stage. And there was the flaw: it was such relative power. If we were free in the





Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

real world, the stage freedom would not matter. I thought I was crazy because both the conventional, male-dominated outlook and feminist doctrine defined what I did as bad. I was having forbidden fun. I knew that the joyousness, the pride in my body and its abilities, was good. In order to claim the feminine power for my own, I gave it a name: *feminissima*.

The word was also a way to own my aggression. The warrior-woman, using sexuality as a weapon, is a masculinist construct, the true counterpart of the macho male. *Feminissima* may have been a tongue-in-cheek word for me at first, but I saw it was a positive way to describe an aggressive female stance, one that implied power in femaleness rather than in imitation maleness.

It also meant reclaiming pride in being physically feminine, in using female body language and the arts of ornamentation. No stripper works directly from her sexuality; that is, she does not try to simulate how she looks and feels making love. Stage sexuality is a highly technical matter. My work made me very conscious of what goes into the commercial image of female sexuality, and so let me see my natural sexuality more clearly.

I realized that I knew how to be sexy on stage because, like all women, I had been trained as a girl in sexual body language. Knowing just what gestures, what facial expressions, movements, and postures excited men was part of my woman's heritage. Becoming fully conscious of it put me in con-

trol of it. I could choose when and how to use sexual body language. It was good to know this, to respect our vast and ancient knowledge, usually labeled as "instinct." And, if I had missed out on those lessons in competition the boys got, at least I was getting some use from my training. But of course it was a low-status job, another aspect of the systematic downgrading of women's work.

Strippers exaggerate women's normal gestures, and likewise they take sexy dressing to absurd extremes that reveal a lot about what female sexuality has meant in male-dominated society. Looking "sexy" can be reduced to four major elements: hard, soft, not-a-woman, and rich.

The hard look emphasizes the contrast between sharp lines and the curves and fullness of a woman's body. Garter belts, corsets, sheath dresses, choker necklines are all part of this look. It's all associated with woman as sexually aggressive or dominant—the vamp, the mistress—but the key element is constraint. It is as if the notion of sexual woman were so overwhelming that she had to be visibly bound.

The soft look plays on straightforward powerlessness. Fluffy, flowy, fluttery clothing communicates that the wearer is ever so soft, pliant, and nurturing.

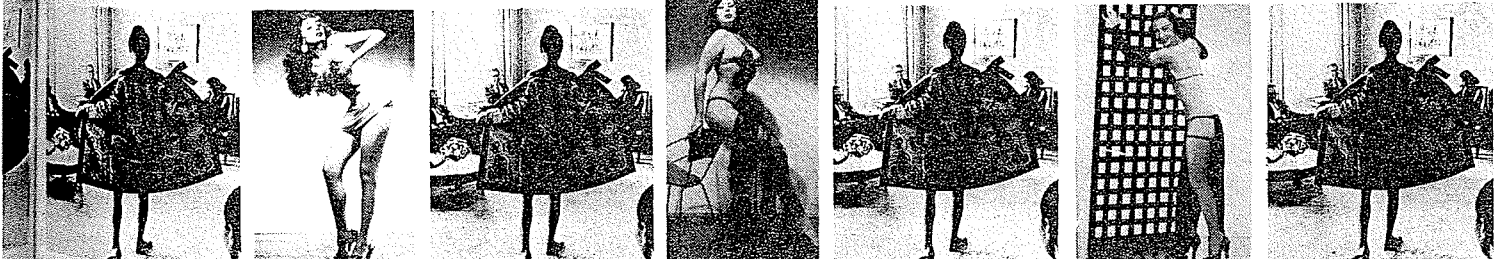
The basic idea of not-a-woman is distancing: the stripper looks sexy because she makes herself look like something other than a regular woman, the kind that insists on being treated like a

real person. Exotic outfits, outer-space costumes, animal get-ups, and other novelty looks, as well as male drag and little-girl clothes, all fall into this category.

The rich look is both a category of sexy dressing and the basis of all the others. Flashy jewelry, lush textures, sparkling surfaces, intricate designs, and ingenious combinations mark all strippers' outfits. Strippers are paragons of conspicuous consumption. These elaborate outfits simulate formal aristocratic evening attire. Classy, that is, subtly upper-class, costumes, and Las Vegas Baroque outfits have the same message—rich is sexy; women are display items.

Analyzing these images was important for me because it let me enjoy them without feeling perverse or getting trapped. I almost succumbed to the phony sexuality for a while. I found myself putting on makeup on my day off, for instance, because my face no longer looked real to me without it. Once I was able to see what all the glamour meant and began to codify my feminine knowledge, I could do all the stripper-things and remain myself. I could delight in my virtuosity, my great *feminissima*.

For me, the most dramatic part of reclaiming my sexual image was confronting how men see women. Until I became a stripper, I had managed to ignore that central concept of the masculinist world view, the concept of woman as a "piece of ass." I learned how deep this idea went, not from any



febrile audience reaction, but from the coolly objective statements of people in the business, such as: "We could get you a better booking if you had red hair, honey," or "You look real good on stage—wouldn't think so, seeing you in your regular clothes." They blatantly appraised me as a commercial item. According to their rules, my sexuality was a product. It was a harsh realization, but liberating. I knew the mind of my enemy. And I knew that, since this dehumanizing view of women was so central to our culture, that it had been in my mind, too. I became conscious of that part of me that saw myself as less than human, and began to resist the self-hatred that has crippled women for so long.

I'm still struggling. I could integrate and absorb all the cultural constructs of femininity into the positive concept of feminissima, but I could not throw all the garbage away forever.

Meanwhile, being a stripper was having a bad effect on my sexuality. For one thing, faking it was getting to me. Under cover of my stage persona, I could be avidly, aggressively sexual and feel powerful, but I also felt divided. I was disowning my sexuality, since I took no responsibility for the consequences of my acts. Making a prod-

uct of sexuality caused further self-alienation: I was watching myself too much. Knowing how to be sexy, and just how sexy I was, made for narcissism.

I felt a lot of sexual frustration, too. I felt no direct sexual sensations on stage, but spending so much time in a sex-charged atmosphere, being the source of the energy, I was often in a state of sexual tension. The job is, however, very isolating socially: either I was in a strange town or full of energy when all my friends were asleep. Unintentionally celibate most of the time, I was all too likely to leap at whatever sexual opportunities presented themselves.

My relationships with men were complicated by anger. Men were my adversaries in a power game, as I was theirs. Playing the role of sex object to the hilt, I let myself feel how bad the situation between men and women was for the first time. I felt powerful, but also angry and cynical.

My love of being a stripper outweighed the negative aspects. At the beginning of this essay, I described the powerful feeling of dynamic female sexuality I experienced on stage. Sometimes, the experience became something more.

Everything I did would suddenly

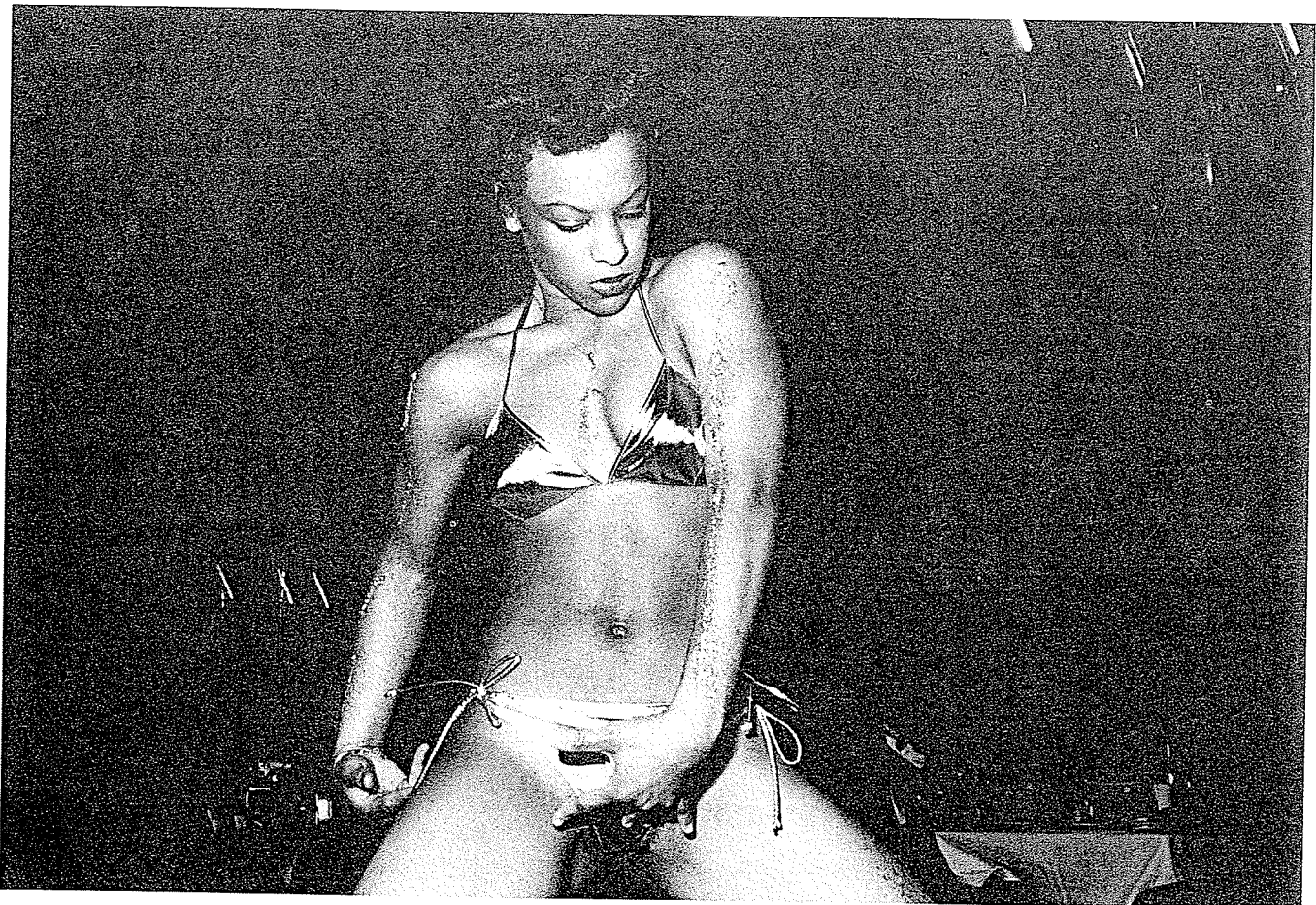
become perfect and effortless. The audience seemed to hang on my every movement. I would feel energy flowing through me to them, feel their energy come into me. I felt bigger than life, but did not so much feel it myself as feel them feeling it. Time seemed frozen and stretched—an eternal now. It was a kind of altered consciousness, a state of ecstasy.

What was happening, I think, was that I became a conduit for elemental female power. This state would not last long; it would seldom happen when I tried for it. It was a mystery, the Goddess becoming manifest.

It was ironic, but strangely appropriate, that she chose the very bastion of male domination in which to appear. The strip club is about the only shrine left to her in our world. It is one of the few places in which woman's power and sexuality are adored. It is not a fitting place. We need to be able to experience that ecstasy in other places, to set ourselves free.

Seph Weene lives in San Francisco and just recently started writing nonfiction.

Coreen Simpson. *The Stripper* (1979). Coreen Simpson is a NYC-based freelance photographer. This photo is from her series *Nitebirds*.





# EDITORIAL

The work in this magazine encourages us to reflect on our individual and collective relationship to our desires for pleasure, our desires for and of the flesh. As women, we are more than curious to know how these desires are constructed, manifested, and acted upon. Because our sexuality and our own analysis of it have been so privatized and trivialized, our need to speak of our experience is urgently felt. We are grateful to the women who have chosen to challenge the feminine condition of muteness and to speak publicly about their sexual situations. In order to imagine a sexual practice that is satisfying and exhilarating, we can use these women's writings to articulate our own silence and to push the project for women's erotic self-definition beyond the narrow confines assigned to us by our conditioning to femininity.

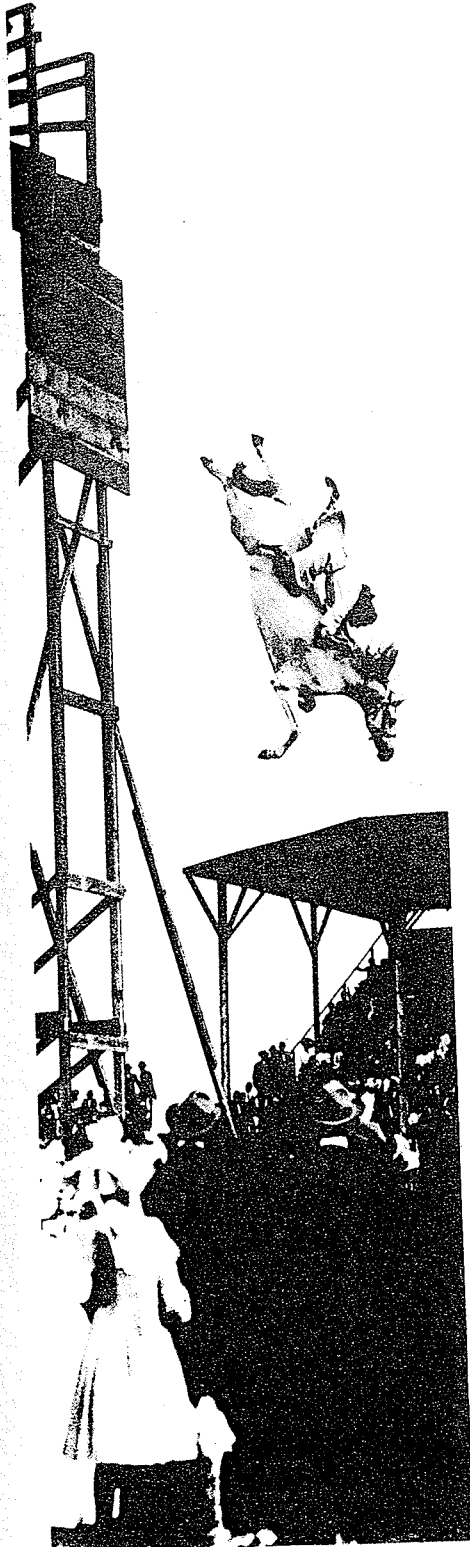
Taken together, this work forces us to examine our assumptions about the nature of female sexuality and its apparent authenticity. In mapping the tortuous territory of culture and psyche, our willingness to act and our hesitations to do so are revealed in their powerful complexity. Desire and repression need an analysis that acknowledges this complexity and affirms the difficulties each woman faces in attempting to rework her relationship to pleasure.

Taking risks with our desires, with our bodies and our conceptions of self, in the pursuit of erotic pleasure feels frightening. This fear grows in part from the generalized anxiety that most of us experience when confronted with the possibilities of change. If we have known ourselves as sexual magnets, waiting, waiting for the pull, then altering our relationship to activity feels uncomfortable. Some of us are more comfortable lamenting our condition, blaming the system or men or women for our lack of sexual satisfaction. The tradition of female lament is revered and embraced. To renounce this stance means giving up the status of victim in relation to our bodies and our pleasure. This change to sexual actor is fearful on another level, an almost imperceptible place where our security as "real" women lies. In a system where Women make love but do not fuck, where Women request but do not demand, women who actively strategize for their own pleasure are



confused about their acceptability into the only gender category that should embrace them. Standing at the frontier of your own gender, looking away and not back, creates an understandable anxiety. If we are not Women as we have been designed, then who are we? Many of us fear for our feminine identity and the loss of what is familiar. We also fear the loss of feminist support.

In the context of this magazine, we have been able to listen and to observe women who have dared to test the boundaries of their tolerance for pleasure. Vicariously and voyeuristically, we as editors have been cheered by the many women who not only yearn and long, but act. The ways in which these women have thought about sexuality have stimulated us to question the feminine reticence we have been constrained by. Our muteness is losing its appeal. As we proceed in this project of creating a feminist understanding of our sexual choices, our changing desires and our erotic possibilities, we prepare the way for a sexual politics that has pleasure as its goal. This magazine is an act of solidarity with those women, ourselves, who will struggle to speak and act in our own interests. Femininity, imposed and embraced, has not served us, since it requires us to renounce the things that can give us power. Let's have more... more pleasure, more variety, more analysis, more debate, more honesty.



# The Male Nude in Women's Art

## Dialectics of a Feminist Iconography

Eunice Golden

Linda Nochlin's question "Why are there no great women artists?" could easily be amended to read: "Why are there no great women artists working with the male image?" Only recently have women begun to portray the male body in terms of their own unabashed sexuality or dealt explicitly with phallic imagery. With a few exceptions—notably Alice Neel's painting of a lecherous Joe Gould (1933)—there are no

precursors to this movement, which began in the 1960's.

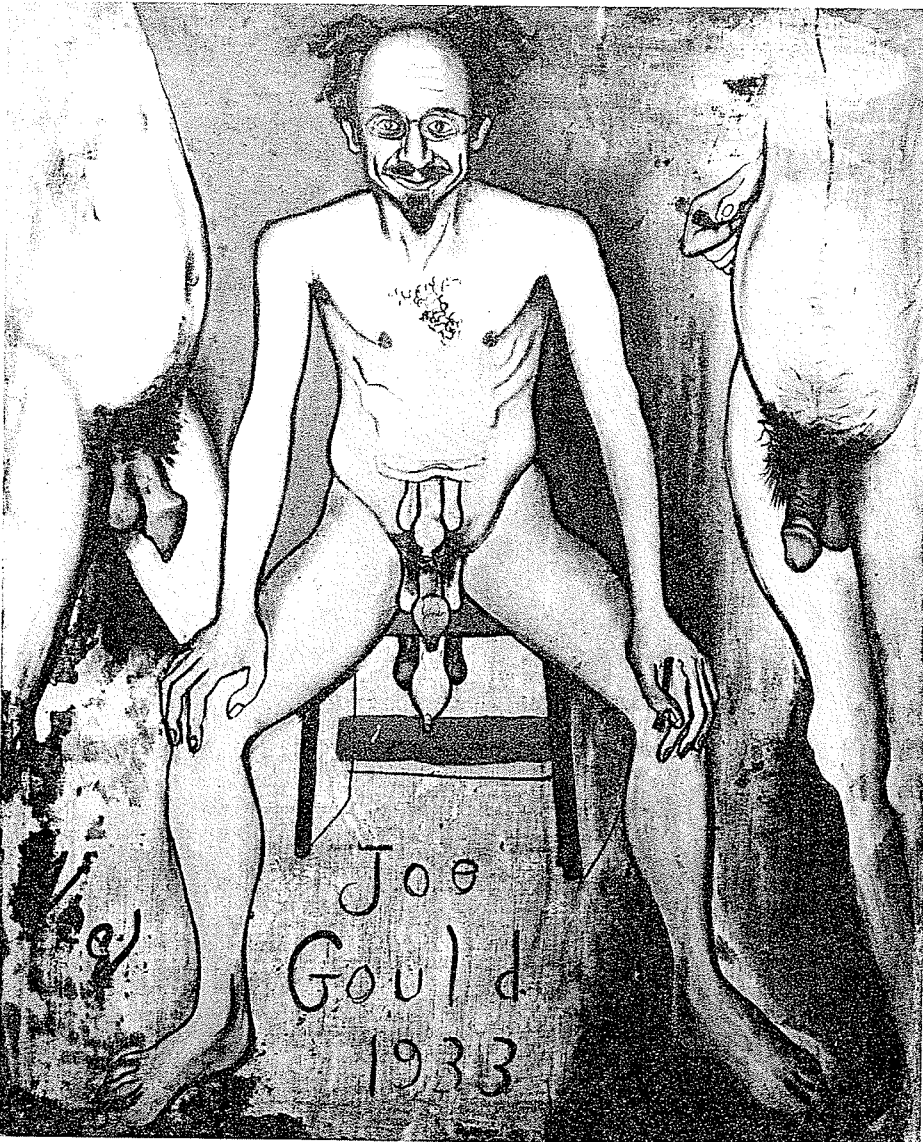
In contrast, the female nude has been an object of eroticism throughout art history. For centuries men have been obsessed with women as objects: objects of necessity, of status, of desire. Men have invested themselves intellectually and emotionally in exploring and clarifying their own problems through the vehicle of the female body.

More than that, they have, through the language of art, saturated our culture with female images based on the concept of male supremacy and female submission, of male power and female vulnerability—in short, on ways of seeing rooted in male experience, male institutions, and male values.

In the last two decades, the women's movement has challenged this male denial of female identity, and the shock waves are still being felt by the culture at large. Yet an art that celebrates as well as explores women's sexuality through the use of the male image is so revolutionary and carries such a powerful threat that it has provoked considerable suppression from the male establishment. While women artists working with images of the male nude have discovered a new energy in challenging male ideas of female sexuality, they have also met with censorship and misunderstanding.

In the sixties there was an explosion of thought in every discipline. As we shed old values and developed new ones, we created a maze of new information to be considered and explored. Thus, when I began to paint the male nude it seemed quite natural to me. It never occurred to me that anyone would be shocked by my subject matter.

As an artist, I took my human concerns with me into the studio. By the early sixties I realized that I needed imagery that permitted me to explore what I was feeling as a woman and as an artist. I began to search for images that would respond to what was happening in my life at that time: tensions in my marriage, my dissatisfaction with my roles as wife and mother, as well as my concern with the politics of capitalism and patriarchy. Why were there no male nudes in contemporary art? I asked myself. I was bored with the female nude and I had many erotic fantasies that I longed to incorporate into my work. I began to draw nude



Alice Neel, *Joe Gould* (1933). Oil on canvas, 39" x 32". Photo by Eric Pollitzer.

studies of my male friends, many of whom were artists themselves. Although there was no overt sexual exchange, this became an exciting mutual experience, reversing the roles of artist and model for many of my subjects. Sometimes the model's penis became erect and I drew fast and furious to capture the moment. I felt that I was making a breakthrough in my own life: giving myself permission to act without inhibition or self-censorship.

After making literally hundreds of "male landscapes," I felt that I had found a personal statement that I wanted to share with the art community. Joining the Ad Hoc Committee for Women Artists and Women in the Arts in the early seventies, I discovered many women artists who were also working with very personal statements, incorporating content and imagery that, while not necessarily sexual, was highly autobiographical. "Central-core" imagery, with its fruit and flower formations and many variations on the circle, was becoming emblematic to the women artists' movement, as a result of Judy Chicago's and Miriam Schapiro's activities on the West Coast. Yet many artists whose work exemplified central-core imagery were reluctant to label their work "sexual" because sexuality in women's art was still being suppressed.

Although my own work did not

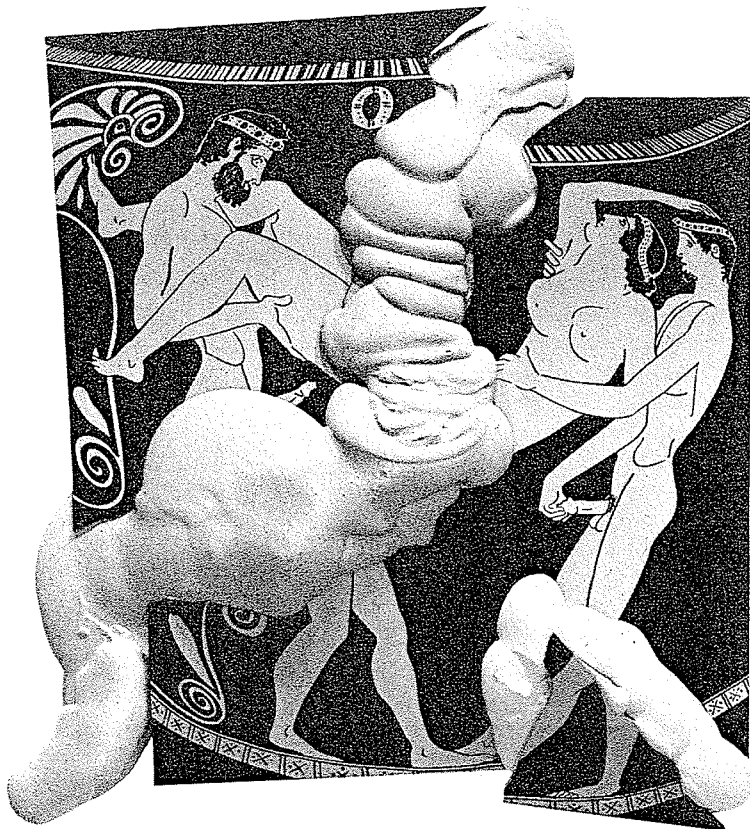
draw on central-core imagery, it did deal with a feminist sensibility. When I began to take my work around to museums and galleries, I knew by their responses that it had a profound impact. When it was rejected with some flimsy excuse—"It didn't fit in with the theme of the show" ("Sons and Others, How Women See Men," Queens Museum, 1976)—I began to recognize the undercurrent of censorship that I and other women artists working with male imagery would confront again and again.

By this time, central-core imagery was an acceptable and even comfortable feminist imagery for many women artists and male critics (who now had a formula for feminist work and some criteria by which to judge it). Yet I wanted to go beyond the autoerotic (even though I sympathized with those women who were attempting to reclaim their own bodies). I wanted to disclaim all the ways that men had looked at women. Within my work, I wanted to explore my heterosexual experience as well as to attack the powerful art historical bias against the male nude as a vehicle for women artists. I used the "male landscape" theme to depict our bombardment by phallic imagery: from architecture and autocratic male institutions to male-determined propaganda in advertising and media. I also wanted to

explore the "phallacy" of that power—its vulnerability to and dependence on a female audience.

This dichotomy of power and vulnerability preoccupied me. In my painting *Purple Sky* (1969) a six-foot male torso seems to expand beyond the edges of the canvas, his erect penis silhouetted against a velvety night sky—a monument to power, an erotically charged power. As I worked on this image I felt myself penetrating the painting's surface and cloaking myself in the skins of the male body landscape, but as a woman, incorporating my body with his, thereby transcending his power and reclaiming my own. In this androgenous state I could even empathize with his eroticism as he caressed his genitals. In *Cronus I* (1968) a rather humorous, headless male god postures in a typical macho stance, daring someone to challenge his autonomy. He clutches his genitals, however, suggesting their vulnerability. In *Study for a Flag* (1974), an almost six-foot penis erect in glory shows again the monumental power of the male establishment. But the penis leans to the side, like the Tower of Pisa, hinting at its fall. These blow-ups of male genitalia have a quality of nakedness, of exposure, yet the image is on the scale of a landscape, bringing the viewer into sharp focus with its detail.

Other women artists are also exploring the male landscape. Marjorie Strider's large penises on Greek vases seem about to explode and exude their messy goo all over the sacred forms of high art—a comment not only on her own sexuality but, through the juxtaposing of images, an indictment of the male culture which dismisses the erotic as a low art form. May Stevens' *Big Daddy Paper Dolls* with their elongated phallic heads visualize the 16th-century Jesuit Possevino's declaration: "Man is his genitals!" while reminding us of the connection between patriarchal power and capitalism. Audrey Flack's *Davey Moore* (the Black boxer who dropped dead while talking to *Life* reporters) celebrates Moore's masculinity while exhibiting it as an instrument of his exploitation and destruction. Nancy Grossman's leathery sculptures suggest that man's reckless use of power is dehumanizing him, dooming him to eternal bondage, zippered and encased in his own paranoia. While these works comment on the dichotomy of power and vulnerability within the male landscape, other works by women artists celebrate the



Marjorie Strider. *Eros Kalos* (1972). Foam, epoxy, and masonite. 68" x 63"

voyeuristic appeal of the male nude.

Martha Edelheit, Sylvia Sleigh, and Marion Pinto, to name a few, delight in gazing on the male body as it reclines in a passive state. They are unselfconsciously voyeuristic in their pleasure as well as assertive in expressing their sexuality. Anita Steckel's *Feminist Peep Show* hits below the belt of Victorian gentlemen. When Alice Neel painted Joe Gould, she lavishly endowed him with three sets of genitals, displaying his arrogance and exhibitionism, but also his impotence in satisfying the magnitude of her sexual appetite. My *Garden of Delights #1* (1980) depicts a male nude reclining in a sensual space of inchoate patterns of patriarchal cultures. Visually and intrapsychically, the viewer is jolted yet lured into participating in the seduction.

However, along with this celebration of pleasure goes the reminder of its frustration. Because there is no voyeuristic tradition for women, the work is often misunderstood: "Why did you make the penis look like a snake?" someone asked me. I replied, "I made it look like a flower." This misunderstanding and the frustration of living within a male landscape often breeds hostility, even rage, among women. Women feel raped by the censorship and vandalism done to their work that deals with sexual imagery.\*

I have discovered that viewers express a great deal of fear, either overtly or covertly, when confronted with my work. Something about the work's eroticism, voyeurism, power, and aggressiveness—even its androgenous nature—provokes this emotional response. Sometimes there is a homophobic

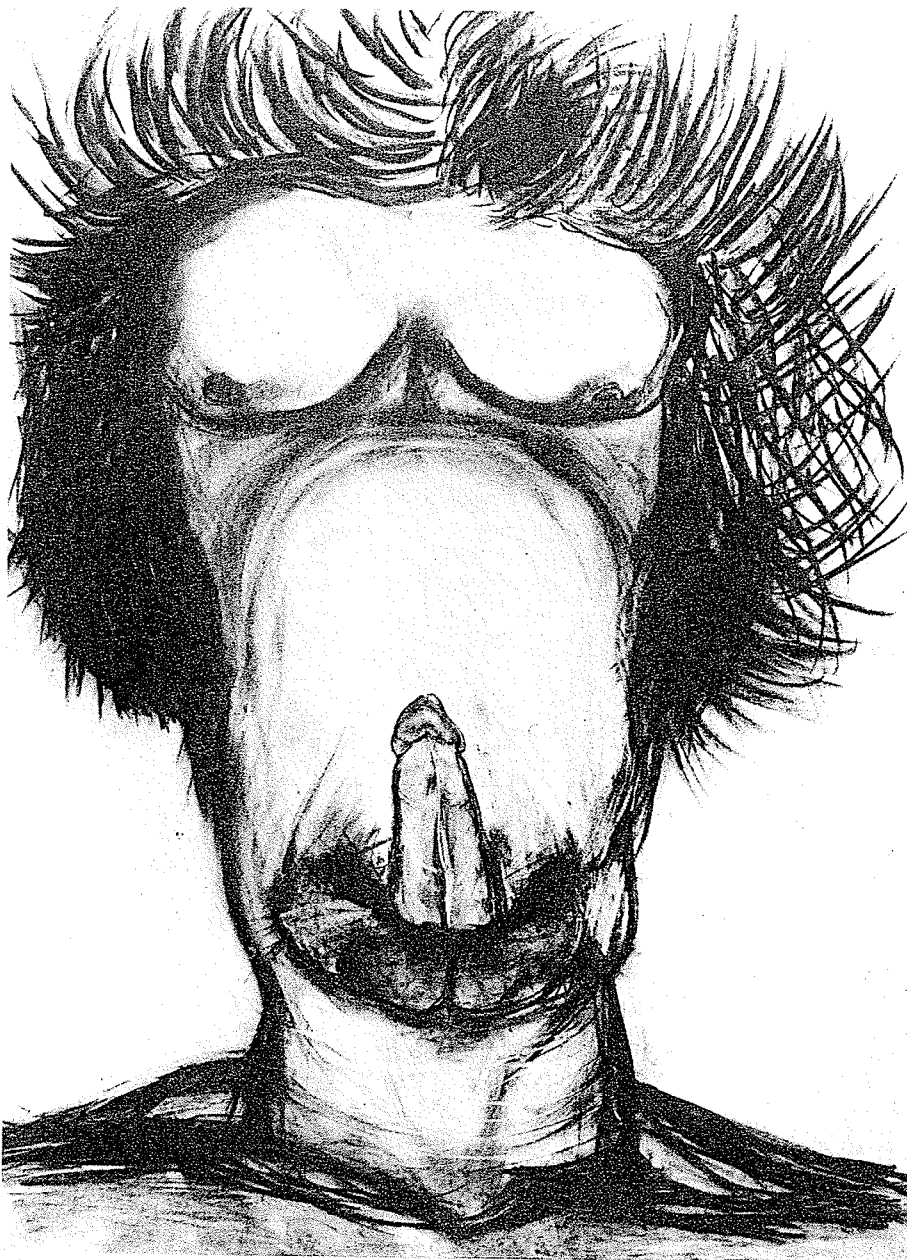
response from heterosexual men. Or the work may evoke childhood fears of castration by a woman. There is also the fear of impotence and genital size comparison. "How could I measure up to that?" several men have commented. "You'll never get a job from a chairman with a small prick" was another remark. Even many women critics feel discomfort when confronted by these images due to their cultural heritage.

Censorship functions on many levels, preventing women from developing a female erotica. Women may refuse to show their work for fear of censorship or vandalism. Or they may find that the sexual imagery within their work is denied, or even disclaim it themselves. Louise Bourgeois' marble landscape sculptures, with their breast/phallic formations, for instance, have only recently been considered as sexual images. Another problem arises when male critics who see themselves as sympathetic to women's art determine formulas for "feminist" art (pattern painting, central-core imagery). If women permit themselves to be influenced by this propaganda, they may find themselves offering only a narcissistic twist to the cheesecake imagery that men have so long venerated in either high or low art.

For women to take control of their own image-making processes, they must become aware of the dialectics of eroticism and power and why such imagery is taboo—especially potent phallic imagery like the erect penis. It is important for women to reclaim their sexuality, free from male precepts, and find their own imagery, their own awareness of themselves, and not only from an autoerotic or narcissistic point of view. There should be a place in women's art where intimacy can be defined in terms that are very broadly sexual: a prophetic art whose richness of fantasy may unleash a healthy appetite for a greater sense awareness as well as unmask the fallacies of male power.

I would like to thank Kay Kenny for all her help on this piece.

\*My *Rape* series (1973) is both a response to this censorship and a comment on Magritte's mutilation of a woman's face with her sexuality.



Eunice Golden. *Rape #2* (1973). Charcoal on paper. 48" x 36"

# A Sense of Touch

Harmony Hammond

Art and sex in contemporary American life have an illicit relationship. While everyone knows about their liaison, it is seldom openly discussed. Perhaps, as Joanna Freuh proposes, this is due to:

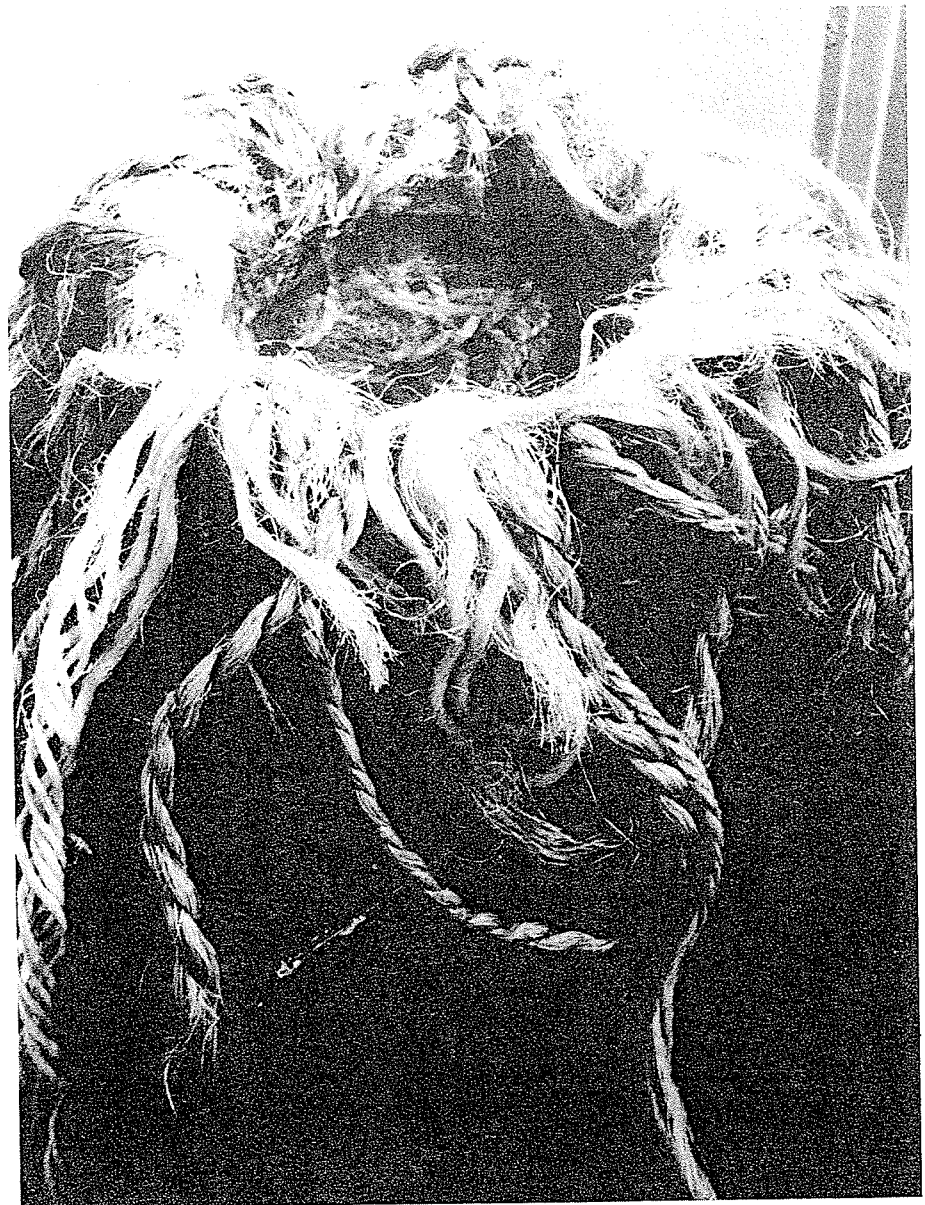
*... our Judeo-Christian culture's suppression of sexuality and fear of the body as a source of pleasure and beauty...; the belief that high art must be divorced from everyday life and activities, such as sex, or must transcend them; the notion that spirituality resides only in asceticism and the soul; [or] the faith in rationalism which maintains that only intellect may know or solve all.<sup>1</sup>*

I think these are accurate observations, but I also think that the absence of serious discussion of sexual issues in art is due to the male monopoly on defining cultural images and to the fact that sexuality in art has nearly always been presented from a male point of view. A basic male attitude toward sexuality—unconnectedness to nature and uncomfortableness with self—is hidden under a blanket of assumed power and superiority. Anything connected to sexuality is treated as a dirty joke.

While sexual imagery has played a role in the art of many cultures, until recently very little of it reflected sexuality from a woman's point of view. In the last 10 years, however, within the context of the feminist movement, women—lesbian and heterosexual—have been getting in touch with and reclaiming their bodies, their sexual feelings, and expressing these feelings in their art. While we can find a few early examples—Georgia O'Keeffe's shells, flowers, and landscapes; Louise Bourgeois' abstract sculptural references to women's bodies; Emily Carr's forest caves; Romaine Brooks' portraits of female friends and lovers; and Isabelle Bishop's depictions of working women spending intimate time together—now there is an abundance of visual art dealing explicitly with women's sexuality as experienced by women.

Since a woman's sexual experience is not the same as a man's, only women can truly express women's sexuality. Any art that is really about women's sexuality as experienced by women is woman-centered.<sup>2</sup> Yet often "women's sexuality in art" and art by lesbians are confused. They are not the same thing. Perhaps all expressions of woman-focused sexuality contain some lesbian feeling, regardless of whether the artist is heterosexual or lesbian, but all art

by lesbians is not sexual by nature. Lesbians, like other artists, make art about many different subjects. But people continue to define lesbians only by their sexuality, as if compulsive, uncontrollable sex were the only preoccupation in their lives, which is like saying that Gertrude and Virginia never wrote, or that Romaine and Emily never painted. Visual art by lesbians is not always overtly lesbian in character and woman-centered art



Amy Hamouda. *Rope Pool*. Plastic and rope. 11" x 11" x 5"

may or may not be made by lesbians.

If we look at woman-centered work, we can see recurring characteristics, themes, and approaches. In this work women are not shown as weak, sick, or passive. They are not objectified or exploited. Nor are they shown in conflict with each other. Instead, they appear strong, healthy, active, and comfortable with their bodies. This is in contrast to the misogynist attitudes toward women's bodies and bodily functions that we observe throughout the history of Western art. Woman-centered sexuality is not portrayed through S & M, violent, pornographic, or victim images.

Carol Duncan points out that "the subjugation of the female appears to be one of the primary motives of modern [male] erotic art."<sup>3</sup> To achieve power and dominance the artist turns the model into the ideal universal and unreal nude or the vampire she-bitch (the femme fatale) who deserves to be and must be restrained or destroyed through specific imagery or through the more sophisticated and subtle but no less dangerous means of fragmentation and abstraction. Woman must be separated from herself, and it must be made clear that she owes her existence to the male artist and not he to her. As Duncan says, for men, "Creation seems to equal possession."

This is not true of sexual imagery in woman-centered art. First of all, women are no longer being defined in relationship to men. The male presence is gone. Women do not depict each other as sex objects to be dominated or possessed, or as objects of any kind. Nikki de Saint Phalle's *Nanūs* and Kate Millet's *Naked Ladies* are powerful women who take up and fill space. Hardly the ideal of the classical contained nude, these women are big—often 10 feet tall—out of proportion (out of control?), have lumps and bumps, and seem to be totally here and in touch with their physical selves. They are not passive, but active, full of energy and exuberance, and, in this sense, erotic.

Audre Lorde writes:

*The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct*

*denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. . . . The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. . . . an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered.<sup>4</sup>*

As women, we are exploring our erotic imagination, often connecting it with our sexual and creative selves, and to do so is political, for it challenges the basis of male supremacy.

In Nancy Fried's bread-dough and porcelain plaques, reminiscent of cloisonné enamels, women are shown together, usually undressed, relaxing at home—lying around, getting something out of the refrigerator, taking a bath, or perhaps snuggling up in each other's arms in front of the TV. Fried delights in all the little details of wom-

en's bodies and women's homes—a hairdo, a tattoo, pubic and underarm hair, the pattern of the wallpaper, the crewelwork on a pillow, or the cat curled up in the corner. These women are open and comfortable with each other and with us, which shouldn't seem unusual except that it is exactly the kind of image that has been missing in art for centuries.

In Cynthia McLean's paintings, Janet Culbertson's and Sandy De Sando's drawings, and Jeb's photographs, women lie around together in a manner that is sometimes sexually erotic but more often reflective of a kind of comfort that women get from each other. Frequently the women have their eyes closed in total trust, their arms in loose hugs, and their heads on each other's shoulders.

In woman-centered art, relationships between women are often por-

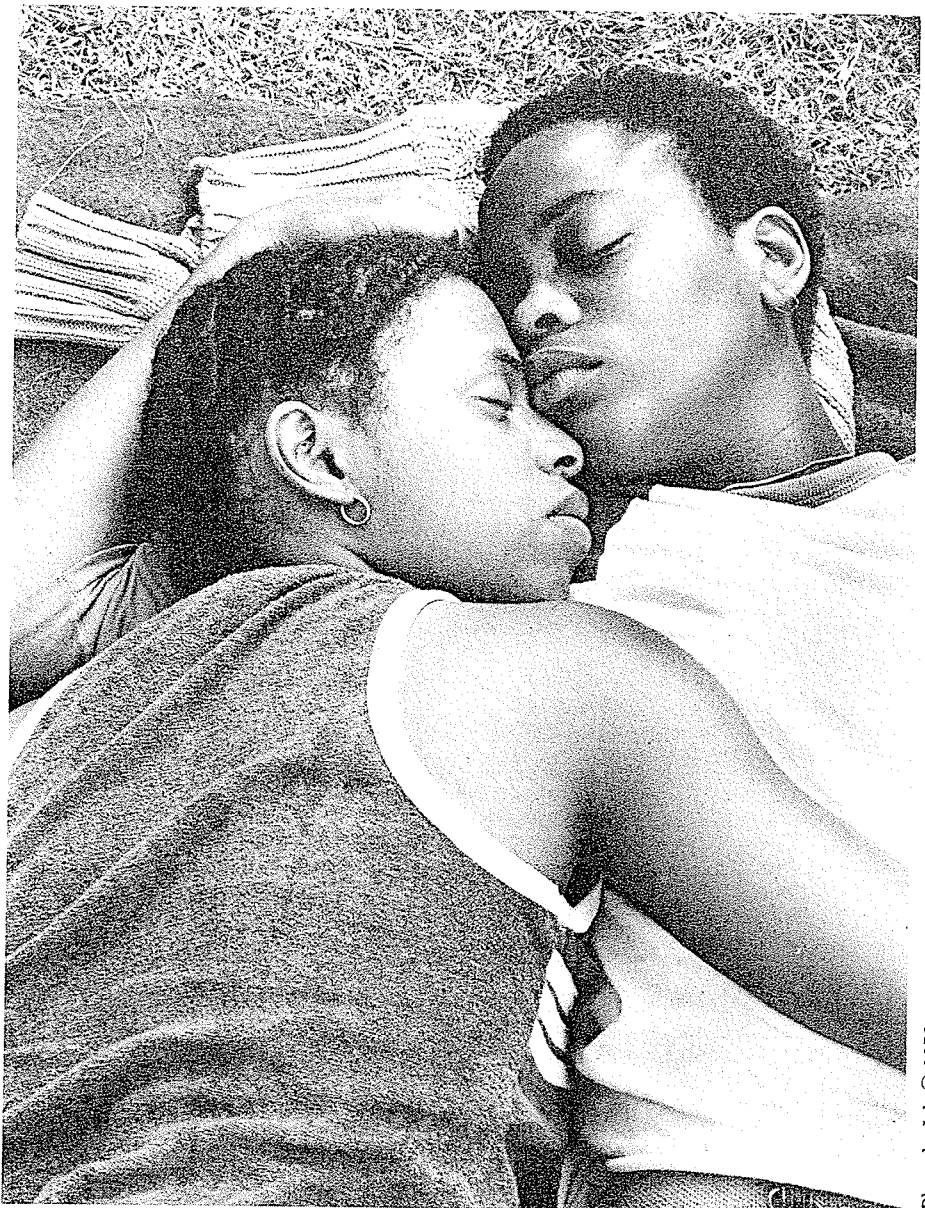


Photo by Jeb © 1979.

trayed or alluded to. Faith Wilding's *Our Skins Are So Thin* is an abstract statement about the reaching out yet vulnerability of touching, and Carla Tardi writes phrases such as "Her eyes are like pools of water" or "She sees right through me" underneath brightly painted organic hair/plant forms. In her series entitled *The Lesbian Body*, Kate Millet combines words with gestural drawings of breasts. The visual effect is of a relaxed, chummy conversation between two breasts about life and love with political overtones.

Women artists are creating images of women making love or openly showing affection for each other in a way that is not voyeuristic or exhibitionist. These images are meant for a female audience and are meant to turn women on. On to each other. On to themselves. Specifically erotic images were first visible in the work of lesbian photographers and in the illustrations in many lesbian-feminist publications; they have now been extended to painting, sculpture, and many graphic forms. It is interesting to note, though, that while art reflecting woman-centered sexuality is made by lesbians and heterosexual women, as far as I know, explicit images of women making love to each other are made only by lesbians (Hollis Sigler, Janet Cooling, Tee Corrine, Kate Millet, Nancy Fried). Many heterosexual women have fantasies of making love with another woman, but none of them depict it. Perhaps this has something to do with the power of art to turn fantasy into reality.

In Mary Frank's stoneware sculptures we often see figures embracing and merging into each other. Two female figures or one male and one female making love, or two sides of the same person? It is unclear, but the blending feels female and masturbatory. Low and reclining, body parts melting into the sand, the clay surface is often imprinted with leaf and fern fossils, implying an almost primeval connection between nature, sexuality, and creativity.

This masturbatory feeling of organic blending, of a heightened erotic sense, appears frequently in woman-centered art. The feeling of touching oneself is directly connected to women's art-making and is at least partially the function of the art-making. While I hesitate to state this publicly for fear that it will be misunderstood or ridiculed, I think it is highly significant

that in private conversation many women artists will mention that they frequently masturbate and enjoy masturbating in their studios and in the process of working. Could it be that this is the place where we are most comfortable, unthreatened, and most in touch with our inner selves—with the erotic life-force Audre Lorde speaks of?

There are a few figurative artists who depict women masturbating; however, masturbation is more frequently implied through the images of the hand or fingers, as in work by Jane Abrams, Marisol, and Joan Semmel. Mary Frank, Helene Aylon, Michelle Stuart, Lynda Benglis, and others convey that quality of feeling primarily through the materials and processes they use. In Lynda Benglis' early work, the orgasmic sexuality seemed very self-focused and woman-centered, masturbatory. The sexuality was the orgasmic feeling caught in action in the latex and foam pieces or the definite labia imagery of the wax pieces. Benglis herself has stated, "All my art is erotic, suggestive. It is about female sexuality, about being a woman."<sup>5</sup>

In our art we are depicting women's bodies as they really are—in different shapes, sizes, and colors. We are painting women of different ages so that all the freckles, wrinkles, and stretch marks show. Joan Semmel paints close-up landscape examinations of her own body, the body of a middle-aged woman stretching, folding, and falling where it will, warm

and sensuous. It is not the firm, glossy body-replica on record album covers, or the thin asexual threads we find in fashion magazines (the slick media versions of the 20th-century paintings Duncan was talking about). In Semmel's paintings the feeling is one of a woman's body following a natural cycle, the body as nature itself. The image is focused downwards; what we can see is framed by the canvas edge, as if to show us an intimate secret—not viewed from the outside, but examined up close. Again, the body fills the space.

Semmel's paintings point to an important aspect of woman-centered sexual work. We, the viewers, simultaneously see and feel the meaning of the picture. We feel the touch on our own bodies. This is quite different from the traditional manner in which women have been sexually portrayed, where the way visually into the painting was to identify the male artist, who has created and controls the depicted woman. As women viewers, we cannot identify with the woman, but have to distance ourselves in order to even look at the work at all. In woman-centered work like Semmel's, we identify with the woman. The body in the painting is the artist's body (literally and metaphorically) and becomes our body, and we identify through this connection and feeling. We become the woman in the picture, in this case the artist, looking at and feeling herself. The sense of touching oneself extended.

In Marisol's drawings and litho-



Joan Semmel. *Hand Down* (1977). Oil. 44" x 62" Photo by Bevan Davies.

graphs, hands or fingers carry pocket-books, form suggestive shapes, or just float in from the edges of the paper. The hands both refer to another part of the body and remain hands, the touching organ. The gesture is not completed but implies a sexuality of touching, allowing us to feel out or complete our own fantasies.

I have been primarily discussing woman-centered sexual imagery in figurative art. However, for many women a strong body sense is indicated through their use of materials and the physical manipulation of those materials. Like many artists, women have played with the sensuousness of thick paint, but it is most often with an awareness of the paint being a "skin" of paint, and therefore a body/skin metaphor.<sup>6</sup> I immediately think of Louise Kramer's giant inflated latex balls with their organic skin surfaces, or Louise Fishman's work, where layers of oil paint and wax are applied and scraped off with a palette knife—the resulting surface sensuous yet restrained, often painful, like layers of skin scratched away, revealing what is underneath. When Joan Snyder slashes one of her paintings and squishes paint, gauze, glue, or papier-mâché into the wound, she not only violates the traditional painting surface, but also speaks of the sexual violence done to women's bodies.

Similarly, a skin of paint or liquid rubber literally holds my wrapped rag sculptures together, becoming a metaphor for how my art-making functions for me—literally holding me and my life together. Wrapping the fabric is in itself a very physical activity, involving the whole body, and ultimately contributes to the abstract sensual sense of the finished piece. I find that materials which suggest direct hand manipulation (clay, plaster, papier-mâché, and fabric) or paint used to suggest finger painting, as well as materials actually taken from bodies—hair, nail clippings, teeth, leather (skin)—seem to carry with them sexual references.

Often this material and process reference to sensuality is combined with an abstract imagery referring to parts of the body, yet simultaneously to the whole body. Louise Bourgeois' latex, marble, and plaster sculptures; Barbara Zucker's hydrocal *Huts*; Amy Hamouda's fiber sculptures; Debbie Jones' carved wood receptacles; Lynda Benglis' latex, foam, and wax pieces; Sandy De Sando's plaster cakes; Donna Byars' vaginal icons of old wood and

fabric; Hannah Wilke's early latex and eraser works; and my own wrapped sculptures are just a few of many examples where the feeling of sensuality comes simultaneously from the materials and their manipulation and from abstract body references.

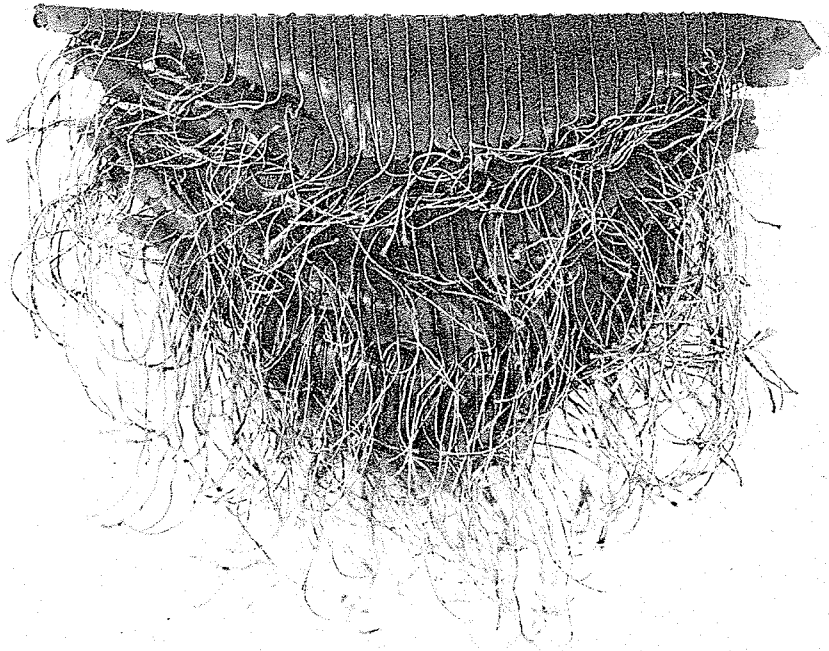
Women talk about getting in touch with themselves as they make work and about that process becoming part of the meaning of the pieces. Many young lesbians have told me that they came out simultaneously as lesbians and as artists. They say that getting in touch with their physical/sexual selves tapped their creative selves and that this allowed them to work from their whole being.

In this respect, Debbie Jones draws distinctions between visual art by heterosexual and lesbian women. She says that straight women depict female forms from the outside, at a distance, while lesbians depict the same forms as they are physically felt inside or experienced as a whole.<sup>7</sup> This sounded right at first, but now I am not sure if I totally agree. The boundaries aren't all that clear. What Jones points out certainly seems true of art by lesbians working with sexual imagery, but it also seems true of any woman-centered sexual imagery. The work is *felt*, not viewed from a distance, and the sexuality comes from a sense of wholeness, touching one's wholeness, one's whole self. While some of us may feel the work is lesbian in that sense, this woman-centered work is made both by women who define themselves as heterosexual and those who define themselves as lesbians.

Women working with sexual symbolism often use vaginal imagery. Shells, flowers, fruits, eggs, caves, containers, bags, houses, boxes, and the landscape are frequently used. In fact, so many women have been working with this kind of symbolism, as a stand-in for the female form, that it would be difficult to discuss them all. Let me mention just a few: Judy Chicago, Betsy Damon, Buffie Johnson, Carla Tardi, Mary Beth Edelson, Ellen Lanyon, Yuko Nii, Ana Mendieta, Shirley Bernstein, Kathryn Sokolnikoff, Donna Dennis, and Jane Abrams.

Jane Abrams' work combines the image of a hand with a body symbol. She uses the image of a rose (genitalia) being touched lightly but deliberately in its center by a female hand (hers or another's we do not know). Often this pastel triple-layered image (the layers of a fantasy or dream state) is placed on a page covered with a feminine pattern that is reminiscent of bedroom or bathroom wallpaper. The fact that Abrams' process is complex and time-consuming, combining photography, intaglio, silkscreen, and drawing, gives the pieces a relaxed extended sense of time, and heightens the erotic sense. I feel her images as if the hand in one of her pieces were touching me.

And sometimes there is a sense of humor. Lili Lakich combines a neon "No Vacancy" sign with a female torso. Jane Abrams has a wonderful etching of a hairy envelope, an "invitation" whose sealing wax must be broken to get to the contents, while Donna Dennis' *False Fronts* and *Entrances*, built



Hannah Wilke. *3 Sisters* (1972). Latex and rope. Feldman Gallery.



exactly to her height, seem like stage flats or movie sets. Just like the women in Jane Bowles' *Two Serious Ladies*, you never get inside, for the doorways are too small or closed off even though interior spaces are alluded to or visible.

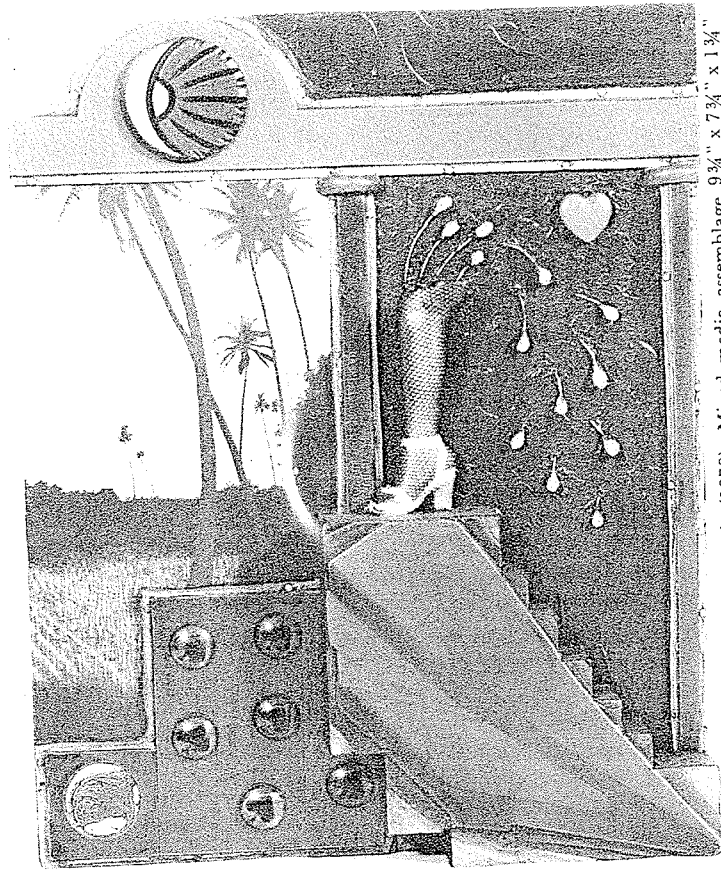
For a long time, and in varying degrees, women have been denied the sexual imagery in their work. Too threatening to be taken seriously, woman-centered art that is overtly sexual is still trivialized, ridiculed, or ignored. However, consciousness and claiming of one's self, sexual, as well as intellectual and spiritual, open a powerful creative source for women. If we are to make art that has meaning, it must be honest, and to make art that is honest, it is essential that we do not cut off any part of ourselves. Sexuality is something we all possess.

A sense of touch is necessary. For art. For revolution. For life.

An earlier version of this article appeared in *New Art Examiner* (Summer 1979). Examples of work by many of the artists mentioned in this article have appeared in previous issues of *Heresies*.

1. Joanna Freuh, "Editorial," *New Art Examiner* (Summer 1979), p. 1.
2. This differs from sexual imagery by women that is male-centered or which merely changes the position of who's on top (Dotty Attie, Judith Bernstein, Eunice Golden, Sylvia Sleight, Anita Steckel, as well as some work by Lynda Benglis and Hannah Wilke). I am not discussing that work here. Nor am I discussing that body of work which attempts to critique male pornography, since I find that most art of this nature that I have seen still depends on the sensationalism and voyeurism of the very images being critiqued.
3. Carol Duncan, "The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," *Heresies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1977), pp. 46-50.
4. Audre Lorde, "The Erotic as Power," *Chrysalis* (1979).
5. Dorothy Sieberling, "The New Sexual Frankness: Goodbye to Hearts and Flowers," *New York* (1974).
6. Lucy Lippard, "Quite Contrary: Body, Nature, Ritual in Women's Art," *Chrysalis*, No. 2 (1977), pp. 30-47.
7. Debbie Jones, "What Does Being a Lesbian Artist Mean to You?," *Heresies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1977), p. 46.

Harmony Hammond is a painter and sculptor. She travels extensively looking at and lecturing and writing about feminist art and politics.



Betye Saar. *Gently Stalking Solitude* (1978). Mixed media assemblage, 9 3/4" x 7 3/4" x 1 3/4". Photo by Lesley Saar. Betye Saar is a mixed media assemblage/collage artist living and working in Los Angeles.

## Island Cabin

Irare Sabásu

she is tounge-deep inside me  
 sucking syrup from the  
 softness of the split-slit door  
 fingernails across my breasts  
 splinters piercing from the floor  
 the sunbeams squirm across the walls  
 even door closed, I hear the waves.  
 she's become vampire-bold  
 her teeth cuts through her smiles  
 and she pierces every pleasure with some pain.  
 she proceeds to hurt me till I shimmer  
 inside pretty pleasure prisms  
 spaced between the coming and the come.  
 even shutters closed, I reel, I feel the sun.  
 she said she's scorpio rising  
 that West Indian women really turn her on  
 and that I am just what she is here for  
 a pleasure trip, open lips,  
 a tropic clit, a nipples tip. . . .  
 a two-week summer slip-away. . . . away  
 even legs closed, she ignites me  
 . . . . . and I implode.

Irare Sabásu, freelance writer, artist, and Taurean, resides in NYC, via the Caribbean. Into sister strength, open minds, and communication via all our senses.

# Pornography and Pleasure

Paula Webster

Every feminist in the New York Metropolitan area has heard of Women Against Pornography. Indeed, in the last few years, pornography has become the focus for a great deal of feminist activity. In one of the best-organized and best-funded campaigns in movement history, women have been encouraged to examine their gut reactions to sexually explicit material and to take a political stand that condemns pornography as a major cause of violence against women.

Women from every part of the movement, and women who would have no part of the movement, came together around this issue. Political differences, both in theory and practice, were set aside as pornography was assigned a privileged position in the discourse on women's oppression. At least publicly, the link was unquestioned. Pornography caused violence against women. Moreover, not only did pornography *cause* violence against women, it *was* violence against women. Pornography made women victims, for it depicted women as subject to men's sexual lusts. The very existence of 42nd Street was an assault on women. All those pictures, films, advertisements degraded and therefore violated women.

A vast sea of feminist solidarity swelled around the issue of pornography. To move against the wave felt truly threatening. Although a few voices addressed contradictions in the anti-porn analysis,<sup>1</sup> no dissenting movement developed. Criticism was kept to a minimum. It is one thing to disagree with a group you are fighting

against, but serious discord within your own movement is problematic. We seem to fear that feminist solidarity, so precious to us all, will not survive any rigorous criticism.

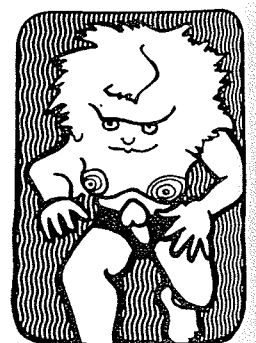
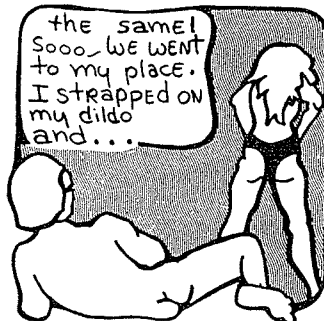
Yet many women, under their breath, confided that something was missing from all this discussion of the production and consumption of sexually explicit material. Dogmatism, moralizing, and censorial mystifying tended to dominate the anti-porn campaign. What about encouraging an honest dialogue about *our* sexual imagination? The shifting of discourse might have opened the floodgates of many passions. So much remains unsaid about our eroticism, our fantasies, our sexual activities, our longings for satisfaction. Our pleasure, as it is constituted inside and out of heterosexuality and patriarchy, never got center stage. Because this was a movement to chastise men for their vices, women were not encouraged to talk about their relationship to sexuality.

But what did we really feel under the onslaught of sexual imagery provided by the campaign? I remember seeing a slide show with about 30 images of predominantly heterosexual couples engaged in intercourse (genital and anal), bondage, and sadomasochism. There were shots of individual women, bound and gagged, pictures of female dominatrixes, assorted album covers, posters, clothing advertisements, as well as a handful of very jarring images of self-mutilation and the now-infamous *Hustler* photos of women arranged as food on a platter or put through a meat grinder.

Despite the lecturer's claim that *all* reactions to the slides were encouraged, each slide was interpreted to reveal its implicit pernicious meaning. One viewer, for example, asked why the photo of a young girl about to have anal intercourse was described as "the violent rape of a child." The reply was that she was obviously under age, so at the least it was statutory rape. The lecturer added that anal intercourse was "very painful"; therefore it was unlikely that this "tiny young girl" could have been anything other than *brutally injured*. I thought this reply indicated certain biases about pain and pleasure and preferred positions. Yet the most important misunderstanding was that a mere representation was spoken of as a reality—as an actual event recorded by some Candid Camera. The multiplicity of issues around gender, power, and sexuality embedded in each slide was disregarded; only one way of seeing was acceptable. Our "visual guide" invariably revealed the real or implied violence of the slide. *All* images of women were suspect.

In one department store ad for girls' shirts the seductive looks of the child models were offered as proof positive that the evil influence of pornography had filtered down to the truly mass media and was spreading like a contagious plague through even the most mundane images. Such photos, not unlike ones we could all find in family scrapbooks of ourselves as pre-teens, were indicted as encouragement to incest. No one thought it strange that these ads, directed primarily at women consumers, did not incite these

I had always had this fantasy about fucking a man with a strap on dildo... after years of searching I found someone who WANTED



women's lust for their sons, daughters, and other women.

To discourage and deny the charge that the campaign was anti-sex, erotica was held up as the *only* sexually explicit material that did not represent violence or cause it. "Erotica" became the code word for stimulation appropriate to a feminist consciousness, while "pornography" was defined as exclusively male and therefore "naturally" devoid of distinctions between sex and violence. The implications of this neat dichotomization and sex-typing of desire reflect, unchanged, the Victorian ideology of innate differences in the nature of male and female libido and fantasy. Men, we are to presume, because of their "excessive" drive, prefer the hard edge of pornography. Women, less driven by the "beast," find erotica just their cup of tea.

Given this map of the sexual world, it was most distressing that during the slide show no erotica was ever presented, leaving the impression that erotica itself is very rare, or so mundane that we can trust our memories to recall its charge. This category of images, absent and therefore mute, was considered essentially unproblematic. It was good, healthy sexual imagery—the standard against which pornography and perhaps our own sexual lives were to be judged. The subjectivity involved in dividing explicitly sexual material into hard-core, soft-core, and erotic was never challenged by the audience.

What is defined as pornography and what is defined as erotica no doubt depends on personal taste, moral boundaries, sexual preferences, cultural and class biases. These definitions have contracted and expanded over time; advocates of one or the other form of imagery have switched camps or staunchly defended their own. Just as normative attitudes about sexual behavior, masculinity and femininity, and the social relations between the sexes have shifted, so have attitudes about sexually explicit material. There are no universal, unchanging criteria for drawing the line between acceptable and unacceptable sexual images.

As feminists, we might question the very impulse to make such a rigid separation, to let a small group of women dictate the boundaries of our morality and our pleasure.

No discussion immediately followed the slide show. Divided into groups, we walked down 42nd Street, entering the shops and arcades where films, magazines, and live sex shows are offered to the male public. For the price of a subway ride, I could actually watch for a few minutes, in my own private booth, the act that for all my years in the nuclear family was considered dirty, disgusting, and therefore taboo. If pornography is propaganda, and I do believe that it is, it is not promoting the violation and degradation of women, but traditional heterosexual intercourse and gender relations. (Perhaps they overlap, but that is another story.) What is missing is romance, shared social status, worries about contraception and shame. The short film I saw was not about love, but it was undeniably about sex.

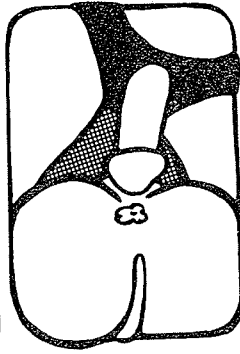
I was grateful for this opportunity to demystify a territory that had been off-limits to me as a woman. I felt relieved about the dangers of pornography, since I had viewed little violence and a lot of consensual sex. However, I was more curious than ever about the meaning and function of such a zone dedicated to solitary sexual stimulation and voyeuristic fantasies. The secrecy surrounding sexual activity had been, for me, the price all women paid for femininity. We were not to speak of our desires, only answer "yes" or "no." The tour evoked complex reactions, including envy, fear, and sexual arousal. The social and psychic repression of my female desire was giving way, every so slightly, under the barrage of sexual imagery. I was a fascinated tourist in an exotic, erotic, and forbidden land.

The tour and slide show raised many questions for me. What is the underlying appeal of pornography? And what does the volume of business done on 42nd Street say about sexual relations? What can pornography tell

us about the nature of desire and its relation to fantasy? Is pornography really any more dangerous to women than fashion magazines, television commercials, and cinema? Otherness in the guise of domestic purity and mindless submission seems more pernicious than Otherness in the guise of sexual activity. How, I wondered, can we begin to measure the effects of objectification in pornography when the Otherness ascribed to us at birth because we are not male already labels us as socially inferior? Such an ancient Otherness leaves little room for any avowal of our subjectivity. Moreover, reality and representation of reality are not the same. Objectification may be a function of representation. All the actors (male and female) in pornography are objectified. They do not speak. They are not individuals. They have no depth, no contours. They are the ritual performers of the culture's sexual paradigms. They are not the real, but a commentary on the real.

What I felt after the tour and slide show was the need for discussion of our many contradictory reactions to what we had seen. Yet the lines had already been drawn between bad and good sex, brainwashed fantasies and uncontaminated desire, danger and purity. The excitement of the unknown, the delight and terror at seeing so much active flesh (male and female), was never acknowledged. Like Mom and Dad, the tour leaders responded exclusively to our reactions of disgust. Our worst adolescent fantasies (or our best) were true. "They" will do anything to get *it*, to have *it*, to use *us*. To see pornography as a safety valve for the aggressive sexuality of men was mistaken. Pornography "really" acts to disinhibit male violence. If it is not done away with, we will see an increase in rape, battery, and child molestation. This final volley of doomsday prediction was not easy to recover from. To disagree was to be aligned with the brainwashed or the naive.

I am convinced that the current anti-porn campaign holds significant dangers for feminists interested in



Having rolled him on to his soft underbelly... cracked his ass and given him the best fuck of his life... 



From *Tits & Clits Comix*.

© CORY 1977

developing an analysis of violence against women and extending an analysis of female sexuality. The provocative claims of the campaign create an enormous obstacle in the form of moral righteousness; they feed the old and voracious anxiety we experience when confronted with sexual imagery. Even more important, the campaign has chosen to organize and theorize around our victimization, our Otherness, not our subjectivity and self-definition. In focusing on what male pornography has done to us, rather than on our own sexual desires, we tend to embrace our sexually deprived condition and begin to police the borders of the double standard that has been used effectively to silence us. It is not in the interests of feminism to circumvent the vast area of sexual repression. And pornography is primarily about sexuality. It is important to wrench this ground out from under the barrage of moralizing so that we can understand the social construction of all our ideas about our own and male sexuality. While it is equally important to understand the cultural determinants of violence against women, I would suggest that these tasks remain separate for the moment.

I have serious reservations about certain tendencies within the anti-porn movement. Are we seeking to protect the ideal of Womanhood by claiming some natural female superiority in the realm of morality and decency? And don't we ignore the sexual socialization of both men and women in asserting that men "by nature" prefer this and women that? What about the subversive elements in pornography, which might help feminists to understand the conditions under which all sexual behavior is negotiated in a sexist society? If women are humiliated by pornography and feel degraded watching women get pleasure, then we might pause to ask if women feel humiliated by real, everyday heterosexuality and its demands. Power relations play an important role in our actual sexual lives. Can we really expect the realm of fantasy to be free of the residues of that power struggle?

As women, we have been brought up in a society where to be sexual in an active or "promiscuous" fashion is to transgress the rules for femininity. Not just the rules set up by men but the rules set and enforced by other women. We learned that men were the prince/beasts and we were their expectant princesses/martyrs, waiting to be

aroused by a kiss, leading to love and marriage and the protection of our vulnerable sexuality. The pursuit of sex threatens to make good girls bad, so we usually accept the cultural standard of sexual minimalism... few partners, fewer positions, less pleasure, and no changing of preference. Nice girls don't talk about desiring sex. We talk about what *they* did to us. Women are allowed to be the objects of desire, to attract attention. But we have tended to refuse the role of sexual subject. Being forward, pushy, seeking sex are not acceptable. Being passive, teasing to please are still preferred to seizing our own pleasure. Pornography might be seen as challenging this protected and confining corner into which women's sexuality has been pushed, for it negates the sacramental character of our sexual desires.

Indeed, I am convinced that por-

his her to us  
her way  
"Oh," she cried  
up the  
reg her with  
there still her  
He had his a her  
and it  
was than a cl  
he Greg's out  
his prize  
as

nography, even in its present form, contains important messages for women. As Angela Carter suggests,<sup>2</sup> it does not tie women's sexuality to reproduction or to a domesticated couple or exclusively to men. It is true that this depiction is created by men, but perhaps it can encourage us to think of what our own images and imaginings might be like.

Television, film, and our mothers all reinforce the notion that only bad girls like sex. If we reject this good girl/bad girl distinction, the split between the mother and the whore, the tour guide and the topless dancer, we begin to understand that neither has a better deal under patriarchy. The comfortable separation between feminists, especially academic feminists, and prostitutes, office workers, and other "exploited women" crumbles when we realize the extent to which all our bodies become commodities, whether

within or outside the nuclear family. In placing the gratification of men above our own, we pose absolutely no danger to male-dominated society. What I am suggesting here is not a withdrawal from sex, but an active pursuit of *our* gratification, with a sense of responsibility, entitlement, and enthusiasm. The good girl/bad girl distinction will fail to terrorize us and control our access to pleasure *only* if we set out to destroy the double standard.

Specifically, what we might take from male pornography is a vision of the mutability of sexual experience and a variety of directions for sexual experimentation. Whatever its limitations, pornography does demystify a number of sexual practices that have been taboo for women. As voyeurs, we can participate in homosexual activity, domination, group sex, and masochistic and sadistic orgies. With the clues we gather here about our own fantasies, we can begin to map out the zones of cerebral and fleshly arousal.

Pornography also offers women a multiplicity of vantage points for analyzing the sexual paradigms that frame all gender relations and constrain our sexual interactions. Pornography implies that we could find all races, genders, ages, and shapes sexually interesting, if only in our minds. Compare this to the pinched reality of a liberal ideology that snidely prods us to do our own thing against a background of political repression. While pornography itself is not a critique of society, its very existence in such a deeply anti-pleasure society speaks to an attempt to introduce a non-moralistic view of sexual practice. Of course, pornography is not a substitute for sexual practice, though it might be an addition to it. Even if women were to miraculously take over this industry, we would only be able to change the content so that *our* masturbatory pleasure was considered. It would not give us permission to act. That permission can only come when we accept that our desires will not make us victims, that our sensuality is not dangerous to our well-being. This will inspire us at the same time that we work to restructure society to be more hospitable to our desires.

My point is that a stance of moralizing about sexual imagery and, by implication, practice gets us no closer to defining how sexual activity and fantasy fit into our lives or our analysis of oppression. If we think that women

can only be the victims of sex, what strategies do we propose for taking control and altering this situation? Each heterosexually involved woman must ask herself if she will continue to refuse sexual autonomy and subjectivity in the name of femininity.

Perhaps it is premature to call for a truly radical feminist pornography-erotica. But to speak of our own desires and to organize for our own and our collective sexual pleasure would be a beginning. We could open the debate about the nature of female sexual desire. It is precisely in the private, secret, and "shameful" realm of our own sexuality that we have feared to take responsibility for being subjects. We easily talk about denying men pornographic pleasure, but this does not bring us closer to gaining our own.

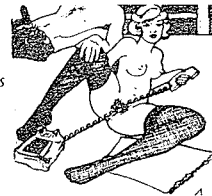
The training we received as girls encouraged us to renounce acting on our own behalf and for our own pleasure. Our own sexual desires threatened Mom and Dad, and they told us how dangerous sex was, especially curiosity or experimentation. They warned us about men. The good ones would protect us and the bad ones would

exploit us. Now we are hearing these same echoes in a feminist campaign. Men are lustful and women are loving. They are violent and we are peaceful. They like rough sex. . . we don't.

Some feminists reject this classification of genders which stresses natural, immutable differences. The essence of male sexuality is not barely repressed violence or insatiable bestiality. Nor is female sexuality passive or characterized by efficiently sanitized longings. As we have come to understand that women are made and not born, we must conclude that men too undergo a similar social construction. Masculinity and femininity are social products that establish but do not reveal the true natures of these hierarchically opposed groups. Are we ready to give up the eternal enemy and challenge our feminization, which leaves us mute about our desires for pleasure, and so many other things? Once we take our eyes off *them* and renounce our obsessive concern with *their* thoughts, feelings, and actions, we can move from blaming to assessing our vision for change.

It is time to organize for our pleasure as well as our protection, to use

From *Wet Satin: Women's Erotic Fantasies*. Published by Last Gasp. © 1976 Shelby Sampson.



pornographic images to raise consciousness about our desires and our fears. If we can switch our focus from men's pleasure to our own, then we have the potential of creating the discourse that will challenge the values of "good girls" (non-sexual women) and explore the bridge that connects and divides expression and repression. If we could imagine operating without all the internal and external constraints society has imposed on us, feminists might create a truly radical pornography that spoke of female desire as we are beginning to know it and as we would like to see it acted out.

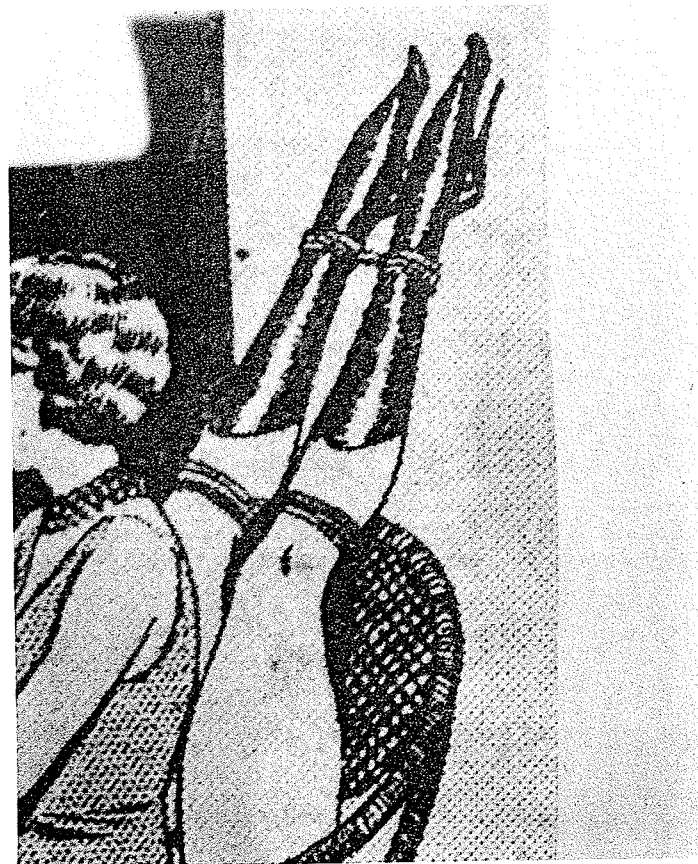
My special thanks to Sue Heinemann for a truly creative edit.

1. See Diedre English, "The Politics of Porn," *Mother Jones*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (April 1980), p. 20; Ellen Willis, in *Village Voice* (Oct. 15, 1979).

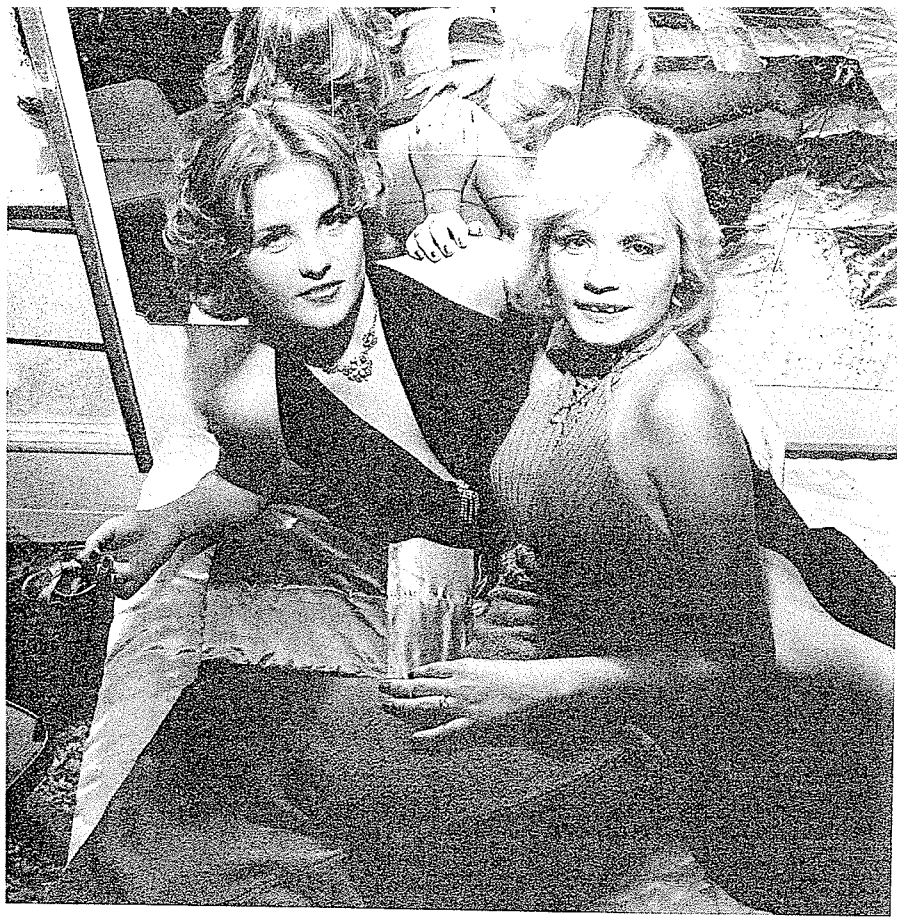
2. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

Paula Webster, a writer and anthropologist, is co-authoring a book called *Bound by Love: The Contradictions of Femininity* (Beacon Press).

She couldn't make up her mind She couldn't  
figure out who to be What to be Is her  
reality as powerful as her fantasy

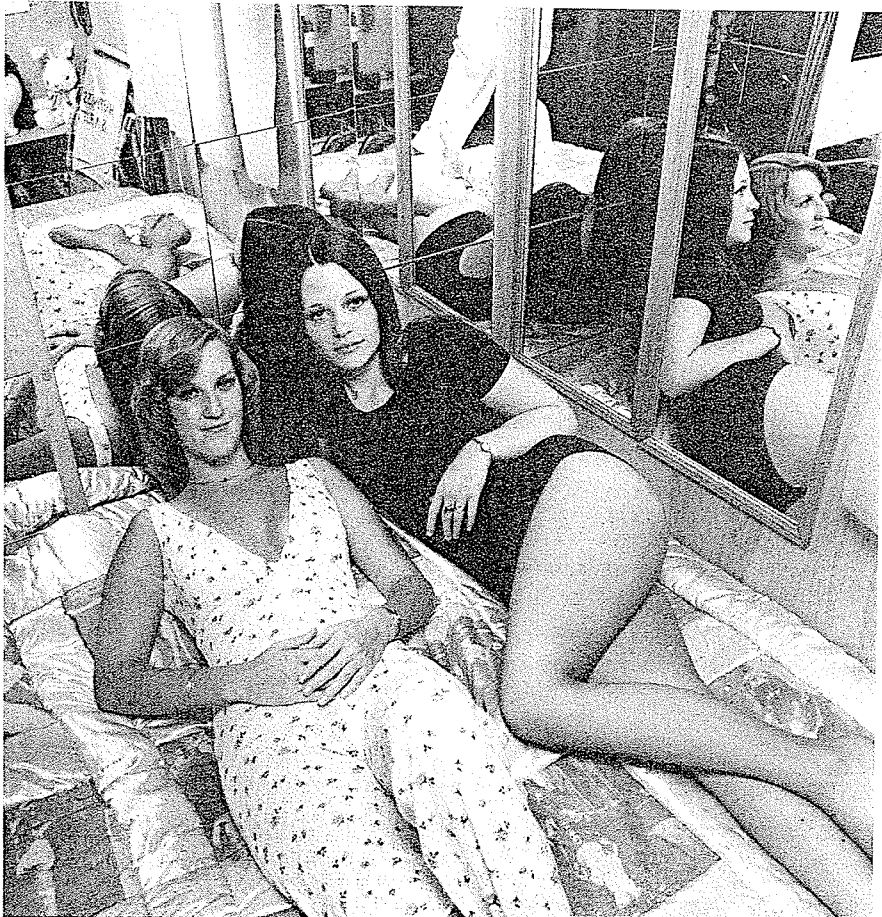


Glenda Hydler. From *Purity pink and everything neat* (January/February 1978). Glenda Hydler, a writer and photographer, has been living in NYC since 1969.



Photos by Sandi Fellman.

## MUSTANG



I began photographing the women who work as prostitutes at Mustang Ranch in the summer of 1973. My interest grew out of the women's studies courses I was taking and my reading of feminist literature, as well as my work as a cocktail waitress at Diamond Don's, a "topless and bottomless" bar. There I served drinks to lecherous, unattractive men, while women (some of whom were my friends and fellow students) stripped to jukebox music on a long stagelike runway. I was fascinated by two things: the women's seeming ability to mentally distance themselves from the reality of the situation and the fact that the men left Diamond Don's with their pockets empty, while the women dancers left each night a few hundred dollars richer. I had read about the historical and socioeconomic factors which created this dynamic, but in reality the women did not appear to fit the picture of powerless victim painted by sociology books and some feminists.

Mustang Ranch claims to be the world's largest legalized whorehouse, a place where approximately 70 women sell sex for a living. I saw it as a perfect environment to explore all the questions in my mind. After being "officially" accepted by Joe Conforte, the owner of the ranch, I was given permission to come and go as I pleased. I spent several days just talking and breaking the ice. It became clear to me that if I was to take photographs that meant anything to me, I would have to develop friendships and build trust between the women and myself. I settled into a pattern of spending six to eight hours a day at the ranch—most often just hanging out, talking, only occasionally photographing. It happened slowly, but the bonds developed. I began to feel that the images were joint creative efforts, in that I allowed the women to present themselves before the camera as they wished to be seen. They selected their clothing and any belongings they wished to be photographed with. I chose to photograph them in their own rooms, where they live and work. They decorate these rooms themselves; their tastes and personalities are reflected in the environments they create.

As my understanding of the women at Mustang grew, I found it impossible to generalize about their motivations, personal histories, and self-concepts. Their experiences and feelings about themselves and the world around them were quite varied. Yet all the women

seemed at home in their bodies in a very special way. They accepted their bodies as beautiful, whatever their particular imperfections (whether a roll of flab, stretch marks, or an occasional scar from surgery). This comfort and pride in their physical selves manifested itself in their gestures and body language. I found the way they touched and caressed themselves and their ease in being physical with each other quite extraordinary.

The intimate moments of sharing I experienced at Mustang were countered by the cool, unromantic business of prostitution. When men enter the building, an electronic buzzer sounds to notify the women of new customers. Fifteen to 20 girls scramble to form a half-circle, as in the grand finale of a beauty pageant. If they're feeling generous, they will sweetly whisper their names one by one for the customer. The man then selects the woman he desires, and they retire to her bedroom. There the customer must tell the woman what he would like done: a straight lay, full french, half and half, etc. She then tells him how much it will cost and he pays in advance. The ranch will accept traveler's checks and credit cards. Before fucking the "john" is checked for VD and his genitals are washed. Kissing on the mouth is not allowed. Neither the transaction nor the interaction seem particularly romantic or even sexy. I imagine the real experience falls considerably short of most people's fantasies. The women split their daily earnings 50/50 with the house. They receive regular medical attention, are fed and groomed, and in general are well cared for by the management.

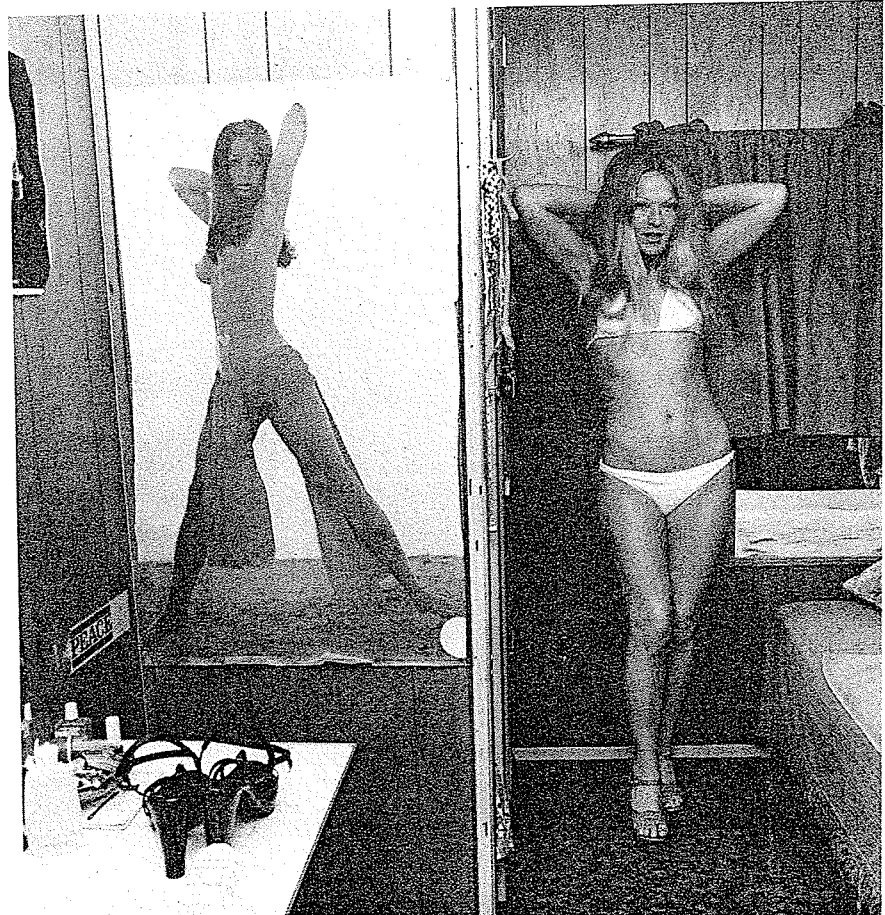
From the beginning I realized the problems in selecting stereotypically "female sex objects" as my subject. Power, demystification of sex, a woman's basic right to govern her own body, how our economic structure contributes to work and life choices, whether those choices are made freely in the true sense of the word, and whether sensuality/sexuality implies anti-feminism were some of the many issues raised for me at Mustang Ranch. My experience made me aware of the complexity of these issues, and the fact that there are no simple answers. Although I learned much, many of these questions remain open and unresolved for me.

Sandi Fellman, artist/photographer, shows at Witkin and Elise Meyer Galleries (NYC) and Ufficio dell'arte (Paris).



## RANCH

Sandi Fellman



# Oh Yes Come In

Batya Weinbaum

"Oh yes come in. Grin. Oh yes come in. Grin. Grin. Come in. Come on right in."

"Are you taking me in?"

"Oh yes. We've heard so much about you. Why so and so said he read what you said. And so and so mentioned. He read what they said you said. And so and so said. He got you in bed. You are very good in bed. That's what so and so said."

"Oh I'd say I'm so-so."

"Why you're turning so red! That's another thing so and so said. Now back to your head. Based on what so and so said, we'd like to buy it. We'd like to use your head. We'd like to try it. Tell me, do you use it in bed?"

"What did so and so said?"

"Oh yes. He said you acted that way."

"Well—I meant to say—I don't always act that way—I meant—what—what's the next line in this play?"

"Well, that's what we're discussing. From what so and so said, we could use your head. And since so and so said you were so good in bed, we'd certainly like to have you. We'd like to make you come. Come come come. Come tell us about the books you've read. Come do come while I'm in. Grin grin. But—there's one thing—ohum—"

"What?"

"Come. Do come. Did you come do do come. Ohum. Come come come. What can I say?"

"Like I said, it's your play."

"Well, we do want you to come. Especially after all this foreplay. But. What can I say?"

"Look don't ask *me* what to say. Of course I want you to say you'll give me the job. I need the goddamn money. But it's not for me to say. That's your part, honey. Figure out your own damn lines. You've got the money."

"Oh come now. We want you to play. Our way. We'd give you the job. Make you start. But then—we'd—"

"We'd what! When do I start? Come on you old fart! When do I start? Give me my part! Give me my money!"

"Well, we'd want you to move away."

"What are you trying to say? Move away?"

"Well, three months after you'd start, we'd move the office, very far away, to North Dakota. You'd have to move with us, to North Dakota."

"But I don't know anyone in North Dakota."

"What can I say?"

"Why the hell are you moving to North Dakota? I don't want to move to North Dakota. I want to stay here. All my life. My life is all here. Who do you think I am? Some kind of wife? Move wherever you go? 'Cause you give me money? Fuck you man. That's not even funny. Now get out of here. Later I'll let you know."

Well, actually you're the one who has to go."

"Hell no. I won't go. To North Dakota. And you promised me all this money. Come on man. You'd better give me the money. You were going to take me in. At least you could buy me off with money. Didn't so and so tell you? I REALLY NEED MONEY!"

"Yes so and so said you needed bread. You wanna go to bed? I'll give you some money. And you could go to North Dakota. We could read there in bed everything you've said. It would be so nice honey. Come to North Dakota. I'll give you money. Come on honey. I want to give you my money."

"Uh-uh, man. You don't get my life for your money. You might get me in bed. You might get my head. But you don't get my life for your money. Go read about all the books I've read. Go read about what they say I said. Go read it. All in bed. With your wife. Eat your money."

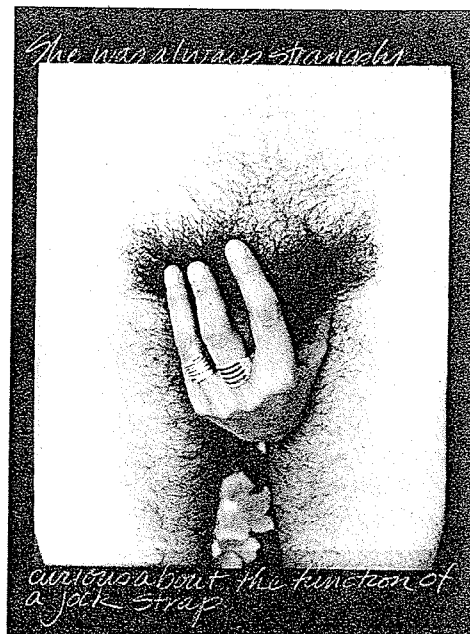
Exit.

Door slams.

Screams: GO FUCK YOUR OWN DAMN WIFE. AND TAKE HER TO NORTH DAKOTA. YOU DON'T GET MY LIFE FOR YOUR MONEY. ONLY MY HEAD.

Batya Weinbaum is the author of *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism* (South End Press) and other theoretical writings.

Barbara DeGenevieve. True Life Novelette #4: The Biggest Cock on the Block.



Barbara DeGenevieve. True Life Novelette #7: The Jock Strap. Barbara DeGenevieve is an artist in New Mexico.



# A FATHER'S INFLUENCE ON THE SEXUALITY OF A YOUNG WOMAN

MARY WINSTON

After Mother died, I started eating in the dining room with Daddy instead of in the kitchen with the kids. I just took my plate in one night and sat down. I wanted to reach out, to comfort him in our mutual sadness and loneliness, to show he could count on me. Maybe out of this shattering occurrence in our lives we could all grow closer as a family. Maybe finally he could become a real person, a father to us, instead of the shadowy figure we packed lunchboxes for, ironed coveralls for, giggled about when he hollered to "shut up that noise."

As bad as I felt for myself, I felt equally bad or worse for Daddy. Mother had been his link in so many ways—to us kids and to other people in general. He was so uncomfortable all the time, except on weekends, when beer and bourbon filled his head with fumes of courage. At those times his personality changed and we called him "Red" (for the red eyes of drunkenness). He became strong then, going on and on about things that had happened at the warehouse that week. In the telling he gave himself better parts to play: "So I said to the sonuvabitch 'Kiss my ass,'" and "Then I had to tell this other fool off. . . ." In this way he coped with all the little slights and humiliations that come to a smallish Black man who doesn't speak much.

Mother died on October 27, 1965. Four days later I was sitting at the dining room table with Daddy. We were addressing thank-you notes for the flowers and cards—at least I was. I don't really know what Daddy was doing; maybe he was reading the paper. That night, October 31st, Halloween night, my older sister Rita had taken the two kids out trick-or-treatin' to get their minds off Mother. So Daddy and I sat at the table alone. We were sitting the long way, at opposite ends of the table. I was contemplating the possible truth of a sympathy card that promised I would meet my mother again "in that home that lies beyond" when he spoke:

"What would you say if I asked you to sleep with me?"

I looked up, then down again, confused and instantly frightened. For the first and only time in my life, the tiny soft hairs on the back of my neck rose slowly, a few at a time. I wished myself out of the room, out of my skin, out of life. "I would say no." With a slight attempt at . . . what? . . . lightness, flippancy perhaps, I tried to counter the paralyzing fear that coated me like a second skin. My mind flashed, searching desperately for something it felt was missing: a sense of protection, of safety.

"Well, that's what I thought," he said speculatively, "but something told me to ask the girl."

The rest of the evening is a blur. Not daring to move, to disturb the thickness of the air in the room, I must have continued with my writing. In the cloudiness that swirled inside my head, I think I tried to erase the words and the entire conversation (an exercise I was to attempt many times afterwards). Wishing—no, willing—it had never occurred, I nearly believed my will had prevailed. As long as it was never mentioned again. . .

A very short time after that the nighttime visits began. Sometimes walking softly, sometimes having removed his artificial leg and therefore crawling, he came through the bathroom that connected our bedrooms, like some mad incarnation of grief, pain, and desire.

"Please, just come and lie in the bed. . . it's so empty. . . I won't bother you. . . please."

"No, Daddy. It's not right. No."

So this is how it was: I was a 16-year-old Black girl, living in a small college town, who had lost forever the one adult I had loved and trusted totally. My life was never to be the same again—that I knew for a fact. My mother touched the part of me I liked best, the part that was not shy. Since she was somewhat reserved, I was able to be aggressive with her in a fun

sort of way. Outside of my three sisters, she was the only human being who really knew me. When we were all home together and Daddy wasn't around to cast a pall on things with his grouchiness, there was a warmth to the air and a fullness in my heart that I comfortably took for granted, until it was suddenly gone one cold night. And now the only other person on whom I could depend for my protection and well-being had decided on the disturbing course my life was to take for years to come.

Granny and Big Mama lived downstairs in the basement, and they must have heard him in the early hours of the morning making his slow, steady way to my room, especially later when I took over Rita's room at the back of the house. He was their landlord, however, as well as their son and nephew. They had to look out for their own skins; they were old and he was not overly generous. They did tell him when I had Michael over, for which I was put on punishment (no after-school activities). But if they ever said anything to him about bothering me, I know nothing of it. Before she moved out to her own apartment, Rita was approached half-heartedly once or twice: "Daddy, get out of here. . . I ain't playin' with you." Somehow her words stuck where mine did not. And somehow, over the countless weekends, Karen and Delores managed to sleep through it all, just as they had the night Mother was rushed to the hospital already dead.

From age 16 until nearly 20, except for the two semesters I lived uptown in the dormitory, Daddy and I each awaited Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights with different emotions. Mine was fear, pure and simple—his, I guess, anticipation. He never drank during the week—those days we acted as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on. If he ever despised himself for what he was doing, it never showed. I began to devise homemade locks for the two bedroom doors—pathetic,

stretchy little things made of nylon stockings. He ordered me to remove them. . . I did. I furrowed out hiding places in the closet, which I never used because I was afraid of being trapped inside. Once at 3:30 in the morning I calmly walked 10 blocks to Rita's apartment. As I pulled the back door of our house shut behind me and tripped down the stairs, I breathed in the fresh cold night air of freedom. I wished I would never have to go home again. Daddy called the next day and ordered me to return within the hour.

As his campaign of harassment mounted, Daddy employed different tactics. First he was pleading, begging, cajoling: "Just because you read something in a textbook that said it's wrong, are you going to go by that?" "I thought you said you wanted to be a social worker." Later he would stumble in from lord-knows-where and say, "I want something clean," or "I guess you remind me of your mother . . . your size and all." Then he became the stern father, once actually getting into my bed when I was in another room and then ordering me to come get in also. I refused. Still later he played the loving-father role, greeting me with, "Come give me a hug." I can remember standing very still one afternoon while he rubbed Vicks on my chest. He made me open a few buttons of my shirt so he could rub down to the tops of my breasts. He insisted on doing it himself—so concerned was he for my health that he couldn't trust me to do it myself.

Late one Saturday night I sat on one of the twin beds in the kids' room watching a movie on TV. On the screen a pale, flaccid white man with a bad case of asthma was muttering into a phone, threatening a woman on the other end. Later in the movie, he kidnapped the woman's younger sister and made her strip so he could send her

clothes as proof that she was with him. Looking at the girl standing there, so young and soft in only her bra and panties, the man started getting other ideas. I sat quietly, drawn into the set, despising the girl who wore fear on her face so blatantly. I wished the wheezing man, who in his powerfulness had somehow become attractive, would do everything he wanted to her—would make her cry and then laugh cruelly at her pitiful weakness. Daddy came into the room and stood behind me.

"Here, take this." It was a highball he was holding out to me—not offering it but shoving it at me. I could smell the strong liquor and guessed the drink was almost straight alcohol. He had never let me drink before; the issue had never even come up, so out of the question was it.

"I don't want that," I said, not taking my eyes off the TV.

His voice was thoughtful, musing: "Now I said to myself, 'I could get the girl drunk, or I could choke her lightly just until she went out.'"

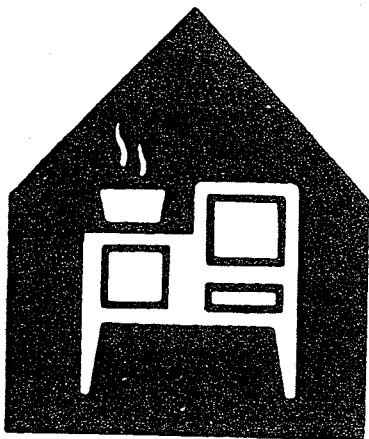
I had always been afraid, but the fear had come from feeling the ground shift under my feet as my most basic beliefs were relentlessly challenged. Now my fear was physical. Daddy was talking rape—and worse. The rules had suddenly changed: there *were* no rules. I began to think he was insane and therefore capable of anything. That was the night I walked to Rita's apartment. Rita talked to her boss—a white man—who said that unless Daddy had actually touched me (which he hadn't), there was nothing to be done legally. He suggested we talk to our minister. I thought of Reverend Cyprus, a dried-out old turtle of a Negro who didn't even know me, so rare were our visits to church. Daddy either overheard us talking or guessed what Rita had done, or maybe he just predicted what we might do. In his authoritative father's voice, he warned us about "putting family business in the street" and involving white people in our affairs.

The Christmas of the first year I was in the dormitory Daddy gave me a Panasonic radio. It was made of wood and was very nice. When he was getting ready to drive me back to school, he said, "I didn't get what *I* wanted for Christmas," and for a fraction of a second before his meaning sunk in, I was wildly hopeful there was some particular thing I could buy for him, thereby putting an end to his desperate pursuit.

In remembering those years, I have a sense of being pulled constantly in many different directions. Knowing there was no chance I would willingly give in to Daddy, I counted on some paternal instinct that *must* still exist inside him which would not allow him to attack me outright. And I felt strongly protective of Karen and Delores, even more so after Rita moved out. I must be there to see that as they matured they were not subjected to the same sexual pressure that was directed at me. Then, too, what would happen if I did get up my nerve and make the first steps toward prosecuting him? Rita was only two years older than I, and surely she would not be allowed to have custody of the three of us. Life with Granny and Big Mama was unthinkable; it would be too different from what we knew. Would we be split up into foster homes? Beyond the need to find a solution to my problem with Daddy, the need to somehow keep the remaining family together asserted itself at all times. And always I felt myself mourning the loss not only of a mother, but of a father as well.

I lived with this situation for nearly four years of my life, years in which young girls develop crushes and find boyfriends and get involved in healthy sex. Although I was very loose with my body when I dated, I was technically a virgin until I was 22. I was so tight and tense that I could not be entered. But no man could call me a tease or a prude, because, after all, wasn't I willing, even eager, to get into bed with him? Underneath it all, however, I knew whose side I was on, and I secretly applauded my unyielding body. I was 21 when I gave in carelessly to a Chicano I met in a bar one night. I don't remember how it felt to finally complete the sex act, because I was going into the second of a series of nervous breakdowns that I suffered between the ages of 21 and 25.

I am better now, living all the way across the country, going to school, trying to find my path and move forward. My father is married again, and he and I have a kind of truce. He is no longer openly angry at me for the things I said and did to him when I was "flipping out"—things like bringing men to his house and threatening him: "You're gonna pay for what you did to me, Daddy." And once when he tried to put me out of my grandmother's house, saying, "You're not going to hide behind my mother," I shouted, "You hid behind mine." Then I ran and got



a knife because he lunged for me with such intense anger that I feared for my safety. It was ugly—abysmally, eternally ugly.

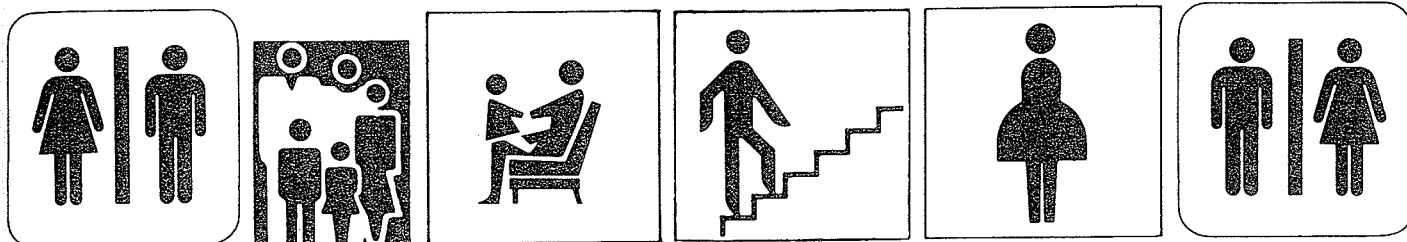
As strange as this might sound, I would like to make some kind of peace with him before he dies—for myself—so I won't have to suffer guilt pains. Yet this rage holds me back. My sense of justice demands some kind of apology, or at least an acknowledgment of the deliberate disruption of my life. The few men I have shared this part of

my past with seem to think I exaggerate my pain and my father's responsibility for my confusion about sex. One lover told me that what happened wasn't such a big deal; after all, the man had just lost his wife, he only had one leg, etc., etc. But my confusion is real and ever-present. To me, men seem a breed of aliens. Not only do I not understand them, but I am terrified of them as well. And many times my behavior insists they prove their unworthiness to me just so I will know I

am right—they *are* all corrupt. I don't want it to be this way, however, and my therapist assures me that once we get to the bottom of this misty, dank swamp I will be able to view men realistically, without terror and contempt.

Lord, I sure hope she is right.

Mary Winston, a writing student at Columbia University, spends as much time as possible in the sun, preferably Caribbean, laughing as loud and often as she can.



## EDITORIAL

The collective's decision not to focus on reproductive or adolescent sexuality creates, for some of us, a serious gap. For many of us, the sexual revolution of the sixties is accepted as fact. From the media, we conclude that teenagers today exist in an atmosphere of permissive sexuality where virginity is passé. With the availability of contraceptives, the rise in teenage pregnancy is seen as a conscious choice among young women rather than the result of ignorance. Perhaps in its eagerness to assume that teenaged women are acting out of a greater sense of sexual freedom, feminism has done little to investigate current sexual mores and note the real heritage of the sexual revolution.

From working as a Planned Parenthood birth control counselor, holding discussions among my freshmen sociology students, and interviewing teenaged mothers, I can offer the following observations: Virginity is still a big issue among teenagers. Many teenagers do not make a distinction between love and "sexual appetite." Waiting for the perfect lover and hoping to avoid confusion are still cited as reasons for "holding on to one's virginity." Sexual desire or pleasure, however, is not an issue. Girls who do it out of love tend not to be concerned with how it feels, nor are they concerned with using sex to negotiate for what they want. Young women most often say that they have

sex because they are in love; perhaps indicative of a sincere respect for romance.

Becoming a sexual person, however, inevitably forces young women to confront reproduction, and fear of pregnancy combined with the problems of getting birth control are central concerns. In spite of this, there is an unwillingness to connect having sex with getting pregnant. Young women may conclude that although sex is something they want, it isn't something they can comfortably plan for. It might tell others that they were loose—tramps; and many teenaged girls are still very worried about their reputa-

tions. This ambivalence toward sexuality may be the result of society's continued unwillingness to see intercourse as acceptable for teenagers.

These observations contrast sharply with the idea of sexual change. It appears that sexual mores among teenagers today conform closely to those of past generations. The good girl/bad girl taboos of the past continue to haunt today's teenagers, overshadowing their fears of pregnancy and the enjoyment of their so-called "sexual freedom." If feminism is ever to undo this pattern, it must become aware of the problems facing teenagers today.



# *What We're Rollin Around in Bed With*

## *Sexual Silences in Feminism: A Conversation toward Ending Them*

Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga

*This article was derived from a series of conversations we entertained for many months. Through it, we wish to illuminate both our common and different relationship to a feminist movement to which we are both committed.*

### The Critique

In terms of sexual issues, it seems feminism has fallen short of its original intent. The whole notion of "the personal is political" which surfaced in the early part of the movement (and which many of us have used to an extreme) is suddenly and ironically dismissed when we begin to discuss sexuality. We have become a relatively sophisticated movement, so many women think they now have to have the theory before they expose the experience. It seems we simply did not take our feminism to heart enough. This most privatized aspect of ourselves, our sex lives, has dead-ended into silence within the feminist movement.

Feminism has never directly addressed women's sexuality except in its most oppressive aspects in relation to men (e.g., marriage, the nuclear family, wife battering, rape, etc.). Heterosexuality is both an actual sexual interaction *and* a system. No matter how we play ourselves out sexually, we are all affected by the system inasmuch as our sexual values are filtered through a society where heterosexuality is considered the norm. It is difficult to believe that there is anyone in the world who hasn't spent some time in great pain over the choices and limitations which that system has forced on all of us. We all suffer from heterosexism every single day (whether we're conscious of it or not). And as long as that's true, men and women, women and women, men and men—all different kinds of sexual combinations—must fight against this system, if we are ever going to perceive ourselves as sexually profitable and loving human beings.

By analyzing the institution of heterosexuality through feminism, we learned what's oppressive about it and why people cooperate with it or don't, but we didn't learn what's *sexual*. We don't really know, for instance, why men and women are still attracted to each other, even through all that oppression, which we know to be true. There is something genuine that happens between heterosexuals, but which gets perverted in a thousand different ways. There *is* heterosexuality outside of heterosexism.

What grew out of this kind of "non-sexual" theory was a "transcendent" definition of sexuality where lesbianism (since it exists outside the institution of heterosexuality) came to be seen as the practice of feminism. It set up a "perfect" vision of egalitarian sexuality, where we could magically leap over our heterosexist conditioning into mutually orgasmic, struggle-free, trouble-free sex. We feel this vision has become both misleading and damaging to many feminists, but in particular to lesbians. Who created this sexual model as a goal in the first place? Who can really live up to such an ideal? There is little language, little literature that reflects the actual sexual struggles of most lesbians, feminist or not.

The failure of feminism to answer all the questions regarding women, in particular women's sexuality, is the same failure the homosexual movement suffers from around gender. It's a confusing of those two things—that some of us are both female and homosexual—that may be the source of some of the tension between the two movements and of the inadequacies of each. When we walk down the street, we are both female and lesbian. We are working-class white and working-class Chicana. We are all these things rolled into one and there is no way to eliminate even one aspect of ourselves.

### The Conversation

**CM:** *In trying to develop sexual theory, I think we should start by talking about what we're rollin around in bed with. We both agree that the way feminism has dealt with sexuality has been entirely inadequate.*

**AH:** Right. Sexual theory has traditionally been used to say *people have been forced to be this thing; people could be that thing.* And you're left standing in the middle going, "Well, I

am here; and I don't know how to get there." It hasn't been able to talk realistically about what people *are* sexually.

I think by focusing on roles in lesbian relationships, we can begin to unravel who we really are in bed. When you hide how profoundly roles can shape your sexuality, you can use that as an example of other things that get hidden. There's a lot of different things that shape the way that people respond

—some not so easy to see, some more forbidden, as I perceive S/M to be. Like with S/M—when I think of it I'm frightened; why? Is it because I might be sexually fascinated with it and I don't know how to accept that? Who am I there? The point is, that when you deny that roles, S/M, fantasy, or any sexual differences exist in the first place, you can only come up with neutered sexuality, where everybody's got

to be basically the same because anything different puts the element of power and deviation in there and threatens the whole picture.

**CM:** Exactly. Remember how I told you that growing up what turned me on sexually, at a very early age, had to do with the fantasy of capture, taking a woman, and my identification was with the man, taking? Well, something like that would be so frightening to bring up in a feminist context...fearing people would put it in some sicko sexual box. And yet, the truth is, I do have some real gut-level misgivings about my sexual connection with capture. It might feel very sexy to imagine "taking" a woman, but it has sometimes occurred at the expense of my feeling, sexually, like I can surrender myself to a woman; that is, always needing to be the one in control, callin the shots. It's a very butch trip and I feel like this can keep me private and protected and can prevent me from fully being able to express myself.

**AH:** But it's not wrong, in and of itself, to have a capture fantasy. The real question is: Does it actually limit you? For instance, does it allow you to eroticize someone else, but never see yourself as erotic? Does it keep you always in control? Does the fantasy force you into a dimension of sexuality that feels very narrow to you? If it causes you to look at your lover in only one light, then you may want to check it out. But if you can't even dream about wanting a woman in this way in the first place, then you can't figure out what is narrow and heterosexist in it and what's just play. After all, it's only one fantasy.

**CM:** Well, what I think is very dangerous about keeping down such fantasies is that they are forced to stay unconscious. Then, next thing you know, in the actual sexual relationship, you become the capturer, that is, you try to have power over your lover, psychologically or whatever. If the desire for power is so hidden and unacknowledged,

it will inevitably surface through manipulation or what-have-you. If you couldn't play capturer, you'd be it.

**AH:** Part of the problem in talking about sexuality is it's so enormous in our culture that people don't have any genuine sense of dimension. So that when you say "capture," every fantasy you've ever heard of from Robin Hood to colonialism comes racing into your mind and all you really maybe wanted to do was have your girlfriend lay you down.

But in feminism, we can't even explore these questions because what they say is, in gender, there is a masculine oppressor and a female oppressee. So whether you might fantasize yourself in a role a man might perform or a woman in reaction to a man, this makes you sick, fucked-up, and you had better go and change it.

If you don't speak of fantasies, they become a kind of amorphous thing that envelops you and hangs over your relationship and you get terrified by the silence. If you have no way to describe what your desire is and what your fear is, you have no way to negotiate with your lover. And I guarantee you, six months or six years later, the relationship has paid. Things that are kept private and hidden become painful and deformed.

When you say that part of your sexuality has been hooked up with capture, I want to say that absolutely there's a heterosexist part of that, but what part of that is just plain dealing with power, sexually? I don't want to live outside of power in my sexuality, but I don't want to be trapped into a heterosexist concept of power either. But what I feel feminism asks of me is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

For example, I think the reason butch/femme stuff got hidden within lesbian-feminism is because people are profoundly afraid of questions of power in bed. And though everybody

doesn't play out power the way I do, the question of power affects who and how you eroticize your sexual need. And it is absolutely at the bottom of all sexual inquiry. I can't say to you, for instance, I am trying to work through being a femme, so I won't have to be one anymore.

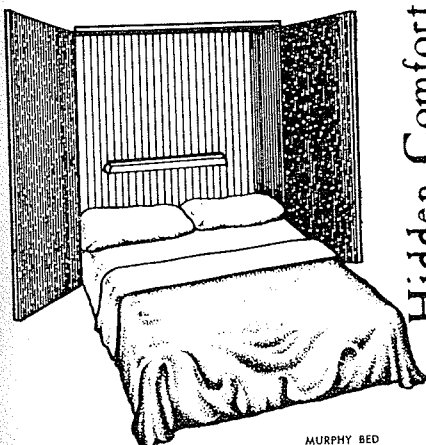
**CM:** But what is femme to you? I told you once that what I thought of as femme was passive, unassertive, etc., and you didn't fit that image. And you said to me, "Well, change your definition of femme."

**AH:** My fantasy life is deeply involved in a butch/femme exchange. I never come together with a woman, sexually, outside of those roles. Femme is active, not passive. It's saying to my partner, "Love me enough to let me go where I need to go and take me there. Don't make me think it through. Give me a way to be so in my body that I don't have to think; that you can fantasize for the both of us. You map it out. You are in control."

It's hard to talk about things like giving up power without it sounding passive. I am willing to give myself over to a woman equal to her amount of wanting. I expose myself for her to appreciate. I open myself out for her to see what's possible for her to love in me that's female. I want her to respond to it. I may not be doing something active with my body, but more eroticizing her need that I feel in her hands as she touches me.

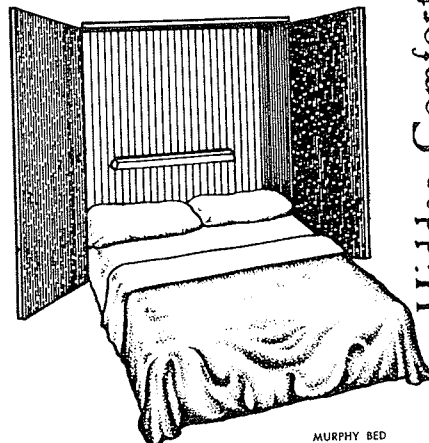
In the same way, as a butch, you want and conceive of a woman in a certain way. You dress a certain way to attract her and you put your sexual need within these certain boundaries to communicate that desire...And yet, there's a part of me that feels maybe all this is not even a question of roles. Maybe it's much richer territory than that.

**CM:** Yes, I feel the way I want a woman can be a very profound experience. Remember I told you how when I looked up at my lover's face when I was



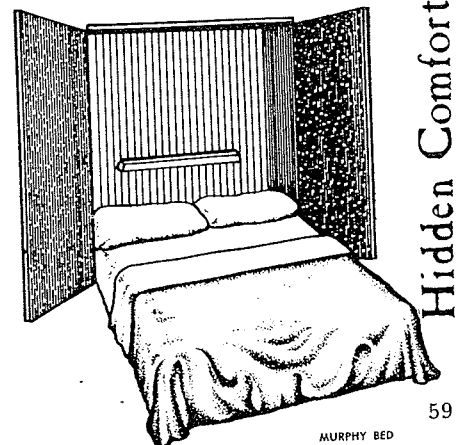
Hidden Comfort

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making love to her (I was actually just kissing her breast at the moment), but when I looked up at her face, I could feel and see how deeply every part of her was present? That every pore in her body was entrusting me to handle her, to take care of her sexual desire. This look on her face is like nothing else. It fills me up. She entrusts me to determine where she'll go sexually. And I honestly feel a power inside me strong enough to heal the deepest wound.

AH: Well, I can't actually see what I look like, but I can feel it in my lover's hands when I look the way you described. When I open myself up more and more to her sensation of wanting a woman, when I eroticize that in her, I feel a kind of ache in my body, but it's not an ache to do something. I can feel a hurt spot and a need and it's there and it's just the tip of it, the tip of that desire and that is what first gets played with, made erotic. It's light and playful. It doesn't commit you to exposing a deeper part of yourself sexually. Then I begin to pick up passion. And the passion isn't butch or femme. It's just passion.

But from this place, if it's working, I begin to imagine myself being *the woman that a woman always wanted*. That's what I begin to eroticize. That's what I begin to feel from my lover's hands. I begin to fantasize myself becoming more and more female in order to comprehend and meet what I feel happening in her body. I don't want her not to be female to me. Her need is female, but it's butch because I am asking her to expose her desire through the movement of her hands on my body and I'll respond. I want to give up power in response to her need. This can feel profoundly powerful and very unpassive.

A lot of times how I feel it in my body is I feel like I have this fantasy of pulling a woman's hips into my cunt. I can feel the need painfully in another woman's body. I can feel the impact and I begin to play and respond to that hunger and desire. And I begin to eroticize the fantasy that *she can't get enuf of me*. It makes me want to enflame my body. What it feels like is that I'm in my own veins and I'm sending heat up into my thighs. It's very hot.

CM: Oh honey, she feels the heat, too.

AH: Yes, and I am making every part of my body accessible to that woman. I completely trust her. There's no place she cannot touch me. My body is liter-

ally open to any way she interprets her sexual need. My power is that I know how to read her inside of her own passion. I can hear her. It's like a sexual language; it's a rhythmic language that she uses her hands for. My body is completely in sync with a lover, but I'm not deciding where she's gonna touch me.

CM: But don't you ever fantasize yourself being on the opposite end of that experience?

AH: Well, not exactly in the same way, because with butches you can't insist on them giving up their sexual identity. You have to go through that identity to that other place. That's why roles are so significant and you can't throw them out. You have to find a way to use them, so you can eventually release your sexuality into other domains that you may feel the role traps you in. But you don't have to throw out the role to explore the sexuality. There are femme ways to orchestrate sexuality. I'm not asking a woman not to be butch. I am asking her to let me express the other part of my own character, where I am actively orchestrating what's happening. I never give up my right to say that I can insist on what happens sexually. . . . Quite often what will happen is I'll simply seduce her. Now, that's very active. The seduction can be very profound, but it's a seduction as a femme.

CM: What comes to my mind is something as simple as you comin over and sittin on her lap. Where a butch, well, she might just go for your throat if she wants you.

AH: Oh yes, different areas for different roles! What's essential is that your attitude doesn't threaten the other person's sexual identity, but plays with it. That's what good seduction is all about. I play a lot in that. It's not that I have to have spike heels on in order to fantasize who I am. Now that's just a lot of classist shit, conceiving of femme in such a narrow way.

CM: Well, I would venture to say that some of these dynamics that you're describing happen between most lesbians, only they may both be in the same drag of flannel shirts and jeans. My feeling, however, is . . . and this is very hard for me. . . what I described earlier about seeing my lover's face entrusting me like she did, well, I want her to take me to that place, too.

AH: Yes, but you don't want to have to deny your butchness to get there. Right?

CM: Well, that's what's hard. To be

butch, to me, is not to be a woman. The classic extreme-butch stereotype is the woman who sexually refuses another woman to touch her. It goes something like this: She doesn't want to feel her femaleness because she thinks of you as the "real" woman and if she makes love to you, she doesn't have to feel her own body as the object of desire. She can be a kind of "bodiless lover." So when you turn over and want to make love to her and make her feel physically like a woman, then what she is up against is QUEER. You are a woman making love to her. She feels queerer than anything in that. Get it?

AH: Got it. Whew!

CM: I believe that probably from a very early age the way you conceived of yourself as female has been very different from me. We both have pain, but I think that there is a particular pain attached if you identified yourself as a butch queer from an early age as I did. I didn't really think of myself as female, or male. I thought of myself as this hybrid or somethin. I just kinda thought of myself as this free agent until I got tits. Then I thought, oh oh, some problem has occurred here. . . . For me, the way you conceive of yourself as a woman and the way I am attracted to women sexually reflect that butch/femme exchange—where a woman believes herself so woman that it really makes me want her.

But for me, I feel a lot of pain around the fact that it has been difficult for me to conceive of myself as thoroughly female in that sexual way. So retaining my "butchness" is not exactly my desired goal. Now that, in itself, is probably all heterosexist bullshit—about what a woman is supposed to be in the first place—but we are talkin about the differences between the way you and I conceive of ourselves as sexual beings.

AH: I think it does make a difference. I would argue that a good femme does not play to the part of you that hates yourself for feelin like a man, but to the part of you that knows you're a woman. Because it's absolutely critical to understand that femmes are women to women and dykes to men in the straight world. You and I are talkin girl to girl. We're not talkin what I was in straight life.

I was ruthless with men, sexually, around what I felt. It was only with women I couldn't avoid opening up my need to have something more than an orgasm. With a woman, I can't refuse to know that the possibility is just there

that she'll reach me some place very deeply each time we make love. That's part of my fear of being a lesbian. I can't refuse that possibility with a woman.

You see, I want you as a woman, not as a man; but, I want you in the way you need to be, which may not be traditionally female, but which is the area that you express as *butch*. Here is where in the other world you have suffered the most damage. My feeling is part of the reason I love to be with butches is because I feel I repair that damage. I make it right to want me that hard. Butches have not been allowed to feel their own desire because that part of butch can be perceived by the straight world as male. I feel I get back my femaleness and give a different definition of femaleness to a butch as a femme. That's what I mean about one of those unexplored territories that goes beyond roles, but goes through roles to get there.

**CM:** *How I fantasize sex roles has been really different for me with different women. I do usually enter into an erotic encounter with a woman from the kind of butch place you described, but I have also felt very ripped off there, finding myself taking all the sexual responsibility. I am seriously attracted to butches sometimes. It's a different dynamic, where the sexuality may not seem as fluid or comprehensible, but I know there's a huge part of me that wants to be handled in the way I described I can handle another woman. I am very compelled toward that "lover" posture. I have never totally reckoned with being the "beloved" and, frankly, I don't know if it takes a butch or a femme or what to get me there. I know that it's a struggle within me and it scares the shit out of me to look at it so directly. I've done this kind of searching emotionally, but to combine sex with it seems like very dangerous stuff.*

**AH:** Well, I think everybody has aspects of roles in their relationships, but I feel pretty out there on the extreme end. . . . I think what feminism did, in its fear of heterosexual control of fantasy, was to say that there was almost no fantasy safe to have, where you weren't going to have to give up power or take it. There's no sexual fantasy I can think of that doesn't include some aspect of that. But I feel like I have been forced to give up some of my richest potential sexually in the way feminism has defined what is, and what's not, "politically correct" in the sexual sphere.

**CM:** *Oh, of course when most feminists talk about sexuality, including lesbianism, they're not talkin about Desire. It is significant to me that I came out only when I met a good feminist, although I knew I was queer since eight or nine. That's only when I'd risk it because I wouldn't have to say it's because I want her. I didn't have to say that when she travels by me, my whole body starts throbbing.*

**AH:** Yes, it's just correct.

**CM:** *It was okay to be with her because we all knew men were really fuckers and there were a lot of "okay" women acknowledging that. Read: white and educated. . . . But that's not why I "came out." How could I say that I wanted women so bad, I was gonna die if I didn't get me one, soon! You know, I just felt the pull in the hips, right?*

**AH:** Yes, really. . . . Well, the first discussion I ever heard of lesbianism among feminists was: "We've been sex objects to men and where did it get us? And here when we're just learning how to be friends with other women, you got to go and sexualize it." That's what they said! "Fuck you. Now I have to worry about you looking down my blouse." That's exactly what they meant. It horrified me. "No no no," I wanted to say, "that's not me. I promise I'll only look at the sky. Please let me come to a meeting. I'm really okay. I just go to the bars and fuck like a rabbit with women who want me. You know?"

Now from the onset, how come feminism was so invested in that? They would not examine sexual need with each other except as oppressor/oppressed. Whatever your experience was you were always the victim. Even if you were the aggressor. So how do dykes fit into that? Dykes who wanted tits, you know?

Now a lot of women have been sexually terrorized and this makes sense, their needing not to have to deal with explicit sexuality, but they made men out of every sexual dyke. "Oh my god, she wants me, too!"

So it became this really repressive movement, where you didn't talk dirty and you didn't want dirty. It really became a bore. So after meetings, we ran to the bars. You couldn't talk about wanting a woman, except very loftily. You couldn't say it hurt at night wanting a woman to touch you. . . . I remember at one meeting breaking down after everybody was talking about being a lesbian very delicately. I began crying. I remember saying, "I

can't help it. I just . . . want her. I want to feel her." And everybody forgiving me. It was this atmosphere of me exorcising this crude sexual need for women.

**CM:** *Shit, Amber. . . I remember being 14 years old and there was this girl, a few years older than me, who I had this crush on. And on the last day of school, I knew I wasn't going to see her for months! We had hugged good-bye and I went straight home. Going into my bedroom, I got into my unmade bed and I remember getting the sheets, winding them into a kind of rope, and pulling them up between my legs and just holding them there under my chin. I just sobbed and sobbed because I knew I couldn't have her, maybe never have a woman to touch. It's just pure need and it's whole. It's like using sexuality to describe how deeply you need/want intimacy, passion, love.*

Most women are not immune from experiencing pain in relation to their sexuality, but certainly lesbians experience a particular pain and oppression. Let us not forget, although feminism would sometimes like us to, that lesbians are oppressed in this world. Possibly, there are some of us who came out through the movement who feel immune to "queer attack," but not the majority of us (no matter when we came out), particularly if you have no economic buffer in this society. If you have enough money and privilege, you can separate yourself from heterosexist oppression. You can be sapphic or somethin', but you don't have to be queer. It's easier to clean up your act and avoid feelin' like a freak if you have a margin in this society because you've got bucks.

The point I am trying to make is that I believe most of us harbor plenty of demons and old hurts inside ourselves around sexuality. I know, for me, that each time I choose to touch another woman, to make love with her, I feel I risk opening up that secret, harbored, vulnerable place. . . . I think why feminism has been particularly attractive to many "queer" lesbians is that it kept us in a place where we wouldn't have to look at our pain around sexuality anymore. Our sisters would just sweep us up into a movement. . . .

**AH:** Yes, we're not just accusing feminism of silence, but our own participation in that silence has stemmed from our absolute terror of facing that profound sexual need. Period.

There is no doubt in my mind that

the feminist movement has radically changed, in an important way, everybody's concept of lesbianism. Everybody across the board. There's not a dyke in the world today (in or out of the bars) who can have the same conversation that she could have had 10 years ago. It seeps through the water system or somethin, you know? Lesbianism is certainly accepted in feminism, but more as a political or intellectual concept. It seems feminism is the last rock of conservatism. It will not be sexualized. It's *prudish* in that way. . . .

Well, I won't give my sexuality up and I won't *not* be a feminist. So I'll build a different movement, but I won't live without either one.

Sometimes, I don't know how to handle how angry I feel about feminism. We may disagree on this. We have been treated in some similar ways, but our relationship to feminism has been different. Mine is a lot longer. I really have taken a lot more shit than you have, specifically around being

femme. I have a personal fury. The more I got in touch with how I felt about women, what made me desire and desirable, the more I felt outside the feminist community and that was just terrifying because, on the one hand, it had given me so much. I loved it. And then, I couldn't be who I was. I felt that about class, too. I could describe my feelings about being a woman, but if I described it from my own class, using that language, my experience wasn't valid. I don't know what to do with my anger, particularly around sexuality.

**CM:** Well, you've gotta be angry. . . . I mean what you were gonna do is turn off the tape, so we'd have no record of your being mad. What comes out of anger. . . if you, one woman, can say I have been a sister all these years and you have not helped me. . . that speaks more to the failure of all that theory and rhetoric than more theory and rhetoric.

**AH:** Yeah. . . Remember that night you and me and M. was at the bar and

we were talkin about roles? She told you later that the reason she had checked out of the conversation was because she knew how much it was hurting me to talk about it. You know, I can't tell you what it meant to me for her to know that. The desperation we all felt at that table talking about sexuality was so great, wanting people to understand why we are the way we are.

**CM:** I know. . . . I remember how at that forum on S/M that happened last spring, how that Samoïs\* woman came to the front of the room and spoke very plainly and clearly about feeling that through S/M she was really coping with power struggles in a tangible way with her lover. That this time, for once, she wasn't leaving the relationship. I can't write her off. I believed her. I believed she was a woman in struggle.

And as feminists, Amber, you and I are interested in struggle.

\*Samoïs is a lesbian-feminist S/M group in the San Francisco Bay Area.

## The Challenge

We would like to suggest that, in terms of dealing with sexual issues both personally and politically, women go back to CR groups. We believe that women must create sexual theory in the same way we created feminist theory. We need to simply get together in places where people agree to suspend their sexual values, so that all of us can feel free to say what we do sexually or want to do or have done to us. We do have fear of using feelings as theory. We do not mean to imply that feelings are everything. They can, however, be used as the beginning to form a movement which can *politically* deal with sexuality in a broad-based, cross-cultural way.

We believe our racial and class backgrounds have a huge effect in determining how we perceive ourselves sexually. Since we are not a movement that is working-class-dominated or a movement that is Third World, we both hold serious reservations as to how this new CR will be conceived. In our involvement in a movement largely controlled by white middle-class women, we feel that the values of their cultures (which may be more closely tied to an American-assimilated puritanism) have been pushed down our throats. The questions arise then: *Whose* feelings and *whose* values will be considered normative in these CR groups? If there is no room for criticism in sexual discussion around race and class issues, we foresee ourselves being gut-checked from the beginning.

We also believe our class and racial backgrounds have a huge effect in determining how we involve ourselves politically. For instance, why is it that it is largely white middle-class women who form the visible leadership in the anti-porn movement? This is particularly true in the Bay Area, where the focus is less on actual violence against women and more on sexist ideology and imagery in the media. Why are women of color not particularly visible in this sex-related single-issue movement? It's certainly not because we are not victims of pornography.

More working-class and Third World women can be seen actively engaged in sex-related issues that *directly* affect the life-and-death concerns of women (abortion, sterilization abuse, health care, welfare, etc.). It's not like we choose this kind of activism because it's an "ideologically correct" position, but because we are the ones pregnant at 16 (straight *and* lesbian), whose daughters get pregnant at 16, who get left by men without childcare, who are self-supporting lesbian mothers with no childcare, and who sign forms to have our tubes tied because we can't read English. But these kinds of distinctions between classes and colors of women are seldom absorbed by the feminist movement as it stands to date.

Essentially, we are challenging other women and ourselves to look where we haven't (this includes through and beyond our class and color) in order to arrive at a synthesis of sexual thought that originates and develops from our varied backgrounds and experiences. We refuse to be debilitated one more time around sexuality, race, or class.

Amber Hollibaugh, a commie dyke with a long history of activism, is presently an editor for *Socialist Review*. Cherríe Moraga, a Chicana poet, essayist, and cultural worker, is co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone).



# A Herstorical Look at Some Aspects of Black Sexuality

*Sylvia Witts Vitale*

Of course we all know that Black people have no problems. Our men have big dicks and know how to use them well. Our women are well endowed and hot in bed. Black sexuality is surrounded by so many myths, realities, half-truths, racist influences, capitalistic influences, classist influences, and resistance that it is necessary to break some of this down so that we can look clearly at the dynamics of all of these factors.

According to the pedagogy of the oppressed, the oppressed seem to some-

how take on the ideology of the oppressor. In the case of Black sexuality, Black people seem to have taken on some stereotypes created by the ignorance and racism of whites. Those very forces that in so many ways were used to shackle the freedom of our expression have been used by us to help foster our own problems in dealing with our sexuality. In other words, myths surround Black sexuality—if we search for the origins, look at what these myths are doing to us, maybe we can then see our way clear to developing a healthy sexuality.

Heterosexual Black women have been affected by many kinds of attitudes about their performance. When I was younger (and I understand from friends that this still goes on), Black women valued big breasts and large behinds. The feeling was that the man wanted some meat on his bone. Many also bragged about being able to accommodate a large penis. Black men valued these aspects of their women and the women therefore valued them if they wanted to have and keep their Black men. I have heard many Black male performers tell jokes or sing songs about the physical aspects of women that they like. Wildman Steve jokes about loving large Black women and musical groups sing about Bertha Butt and the Butt Sisters. That is not to say that all of these praises are negative. Large behinds are an African value. As a matter of fact, Europeans must have also valued African women's posteriors because they designed bustles as posterior extenders for European women.

When I hear tales from men and women about what went down in bed it does not sound like love, it sounds more like hostility. When I hear, "I fucked her so hard she could barely walk the next day," or "I laid it on him so bad that I know he'll come back home to me now," it seems to me that a war is being waged in the bedroom. Sex is used as a tool, a weapon to strike back for all the day's frustrations. In addition, when the Black male and Black female go to bed, they are not alone. They take along with them all of the super-duper stereotypes of what it is supposed to be like with them.

Black homosexual and lesbian relationships not only take on some of the Black sexual myths, they take on the heterosexual ones also. For the most part, there were no visible positive role models for homophile unions. They existed and still exist mostly within a heterosexual context. That means that one partner is masculine/butch and the other is feminine/femme; one is dominant and the other passive. Lesbians fell into the same kinds of traps because, as women tried to escape being oppressed by men, some turned into the oppressor toward other women. They were told if you are a lesbian, you must be butch and tough like a man. Old psychological and medical journals even talk about masculinized women.

I've heard people say: "Lesbians are a serious threat to nationalistic Blacks because as women, they are the mothers of our future forces. If women start turning to each other, where will the babies come from? Lesbians must



stop being selfish and looking out for their pleasure when the birth of a new nation is at stake." The solution to the lesbian's problem is "a good fuck." All she needs supposedly is the right man with the right medicine to straighten her out.

Black people have certainly internalized a lot of white stereotypes about our sexuality, as well as created and perpetuated our own. Let's look at some of the origins of these stereotypes. If we examine the breeding farms in Amerika during the enslavement of Black people, we can find documentation that bears out some stereotypes' origins. Semi-nude and sometimes fully nude slaves were bought and sold on the auction block. This was done so that the prospective buyer could see what kind of merchandise he was getting. A slave with a large penis and testes was thought of as a good breeder. Large-boned women slaves with large breasts were also considered good breeders. These slaves were forced to perform sexually in front of masters and overseers. This act was sometimes viewed as sexually arousing so that after the performance with the slave male, the Black woman was often repeatedly sexually abused by the master and the overseer. This sexual abuse by whites has resulted in our many shades of Blackness—from very dark to light-bright-and-damn-near-white.

Personal accounts from masters' and overseers' notes and diaries, as well as oral histories of ex-slaves, reveal how Blacks were considered to be sexual beings. From these experiences you get the big and hard penis stories. These experiences also talk about the readiness and animalistic nature of the Black woman. Slaves were not considered as people but as chattel. Therefore they were not supposed to have rights, feelings, or thoughts about how they were being treated. So if a white man wanted sex with a slave, he just took it. She was supposed to be "ready" at all times. This "taking" from a Black woman existed long after slavery and continues even today. That is why the belief historically from whites is that Black women can't be raped. How can it be considered rape or sexual abuse when it is so natural to just "take" it from her as a tradition? This bears out in our modern culture especially when we know that this happens to incarcerated women. Joan Little is a case in point.

From the breeding farm experi-

ence, I can see the growth of many of the stereotypes about the Black man's penis size, his use of it, the Black woman's promiscuity, her ability to accommodate a great deal of sex, her animalistic behavior, her bearing a lot of children out of wedlock, and so on. Old myths have a tendency to endure.

Our puritan era in Amerika left legacies about women that have been well preserved. The pure white woman was not supposed to have sex to enjoy it, but was expected to just lie there and pray for it all to be over soon. So, for wild sex and pleasure, the white male either went to a house of ill-repute (which costs money) or, better still, to the slave quarters. There he could choose from among many young slaves with whom to engage in fun sex.

If we go even further back to a time in Africa before we were captured, it is possible to speculate about the origins of a few other stereotypes. For the most part, the continent of Africa is hot, especially on the West Coast. When whites landed there, they observed Africans going about their everyday activities with a minimal amount of cloth covering their bodies. Europeans were fully dressed in shoes, socks, pants, shirts, and sometimes even jackets. Since Europeans were used to so much clothing, looking at Africans made them think of them as sexually loose. After all, women were bare-breasted and children ran around nude. Nudity and promiscuity were equated. Also, as recently stated in *Essence*, Africans handled the knowledge of sexuality with their children and villagers in a non-restrictive manner:

*Nowhere is traditional Africa's casualness toward sex more manifest than in its attitudes toward nudity. Africans prefer not to be encumbered by clothing beyond that which is necessary in a hot humid climate. Both boys and girls walk about naked and become familiar with genitals as they work, sit, bathe or relieve themselves.<sup>1</sup>*

From our African culture I can see other stereotypes that emerged, such as that about Black sexual prowess and the many forms that this takes. When whites went to Africa, they did not understand our language, culture, rituals, or sexual behavior. So they generalized about African sexual behavior based on the tribal nations that they were observing. Thus, we have stereotyped information that is distorted and invented by racist and sexist minds that thought of Africans as

property. Whites invented myths to justify slavery and abusive sexual exploitation.

Black female and male relationships have been strained for hundreds of years due to external racist manipulation and inside destruction. We do a lot of negative things to one another that are destroying our otherwise positive aspects of sexuality. Black males and females have to stop playing the game of "who's the most oppressed" or "who's oppressing whom." Black women sometimes claim that the brothers are not sensitive, too rough, just in the relationship for the sex, playing around with other women too much, etc. Black men sometimes claim that the Black woman expects too much, is not "soft and lady-like," only thinks about money, etc. According to the realities of their lives, they're both probably right. My concern is to help iron out these conflicts. In order to do that we need to look at the totality of our sexuality—Africa, slavery, poverty, urbanization, stereotypes, attitudes, behavior, everything.

One of the dangers that hangs over our heads is our inability to honestly discuss these matters with one another. Our negative images come from a place where we learned to take, fight, and show little emotion. As Yvonne Flowers says, "One of our legacies from slavery is beatings and physical abuse. We were whipped to make us work and to break our spirit. We are still haunted by our master's lashings in the form of battered persons—our children, women, and spouses. Let us take *that* out of the closet."<sup>2</sup>

Black mothers did not school Black women as to what to look out for with men. How could they if they in some ways did not know how to explain it? So it was left unsaid. Our learning was through experience and mistakes. The only times I got some information about men from my elders was when they were talking in the kitchen and I was not supposed to listen. I'd hear things like "men aren't shit," "those men lie so, even when you catch them," "a woman can't live with them and she can't live without them," "it's better to have a no good man than no man at all," and so on. I know that men heard tales to equal these with reference to women. If a Black woman followed the ethics of the puritan teachings, she would be as repressed sexually as the white women who suffered it. If she accepts the racist/sexist stereotypes about what she is supposed

to do and supposed to be, such as that of the hot mama, animalistic woman, she still loses out.

Consequently, internalizing these stereotypes causes us to act out of all kinds of bags. The women and men who fit into these stereotypes, operate from them, and are comfortable about them have little problem until they become too oppressive. By too oppressive I mean that one sex or the other, or both, get to the point where their functioning is impaired by all of the negative factors involved in making a relationship a disaster. However, the women or men who have images of these stereotypes hanging over them, and who either do not fit well into them or chose not to fit into them, do suffer greatly. When a young girl holds on to her virginity out of whatever choice, or does something other than heterosexual genital intercourse, does not respond like a wild, hot mama, or cannot accommodate a big dick, she is marked as a tease, castrating bitch, etc. There is obviously something wrong with her. When Black lesbians establish long-term relationships with one another with or without children, they are constantly struggling against oppressive stereotypes.

When Black women started talking to one another in small groups, we found out a whole lot of shit. The first sigh of relief came when we realized that the problems we faced in our sexual lives were not restricted to just us. Black men need to do this with each other.

We need to identify which problems come from "them" and which problems come from us. Obviously this is not an easy task. Black people, and Black women in particular, never had an opportunity to define ourselves because we've been so busy fighting so many racist myths. Our sexuality has been defined by non-Blacks, most of whom operated from an anthropological and sociological framework which saw Blacks as a problem to be studied, not as a valid alternative culture. We have long ago seen this as our work to do and are now in a position to do something about it.

As a possible first step I see us waging an individual struggle. We have to examine ourselves closely. The Witts-Vitale test that I have created and used in my work is designed to show us how we relate to the same sex, and other sex, and to images about us. One of the activities in this test is to make lists answering questions such as

"How do men see me as a sexual being?" "How do women see me as a sexual being?" and so on, until we get a profile of the individual. Once the profile is made up, we talk about the items. This exercise can be done with one individual or in a small group setting. After we understand more about what we like, want, and need, we can begin to try to understand the uniqueness of our significant other.

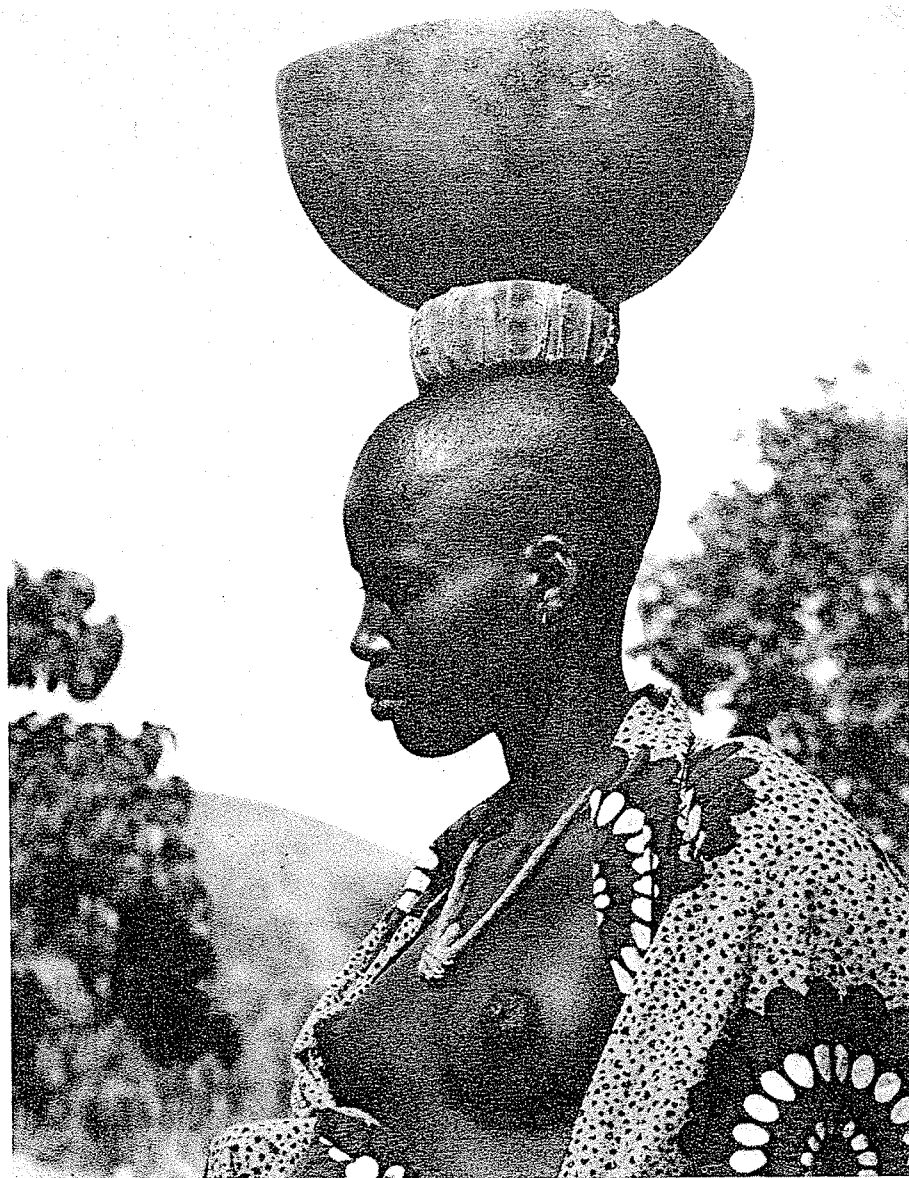
I see healthy Black sexuality as resisting the racist ideology of the oppressor that has restricted and distorted our sexual expression. It also means dealing with sexism in the Black community and Black men, raising the consciousness about how they sexually oppress Black women. Resistance means having loving, caring sexuality where the woman is an active participant and the man is a tender and understanding lover. Resistance also means that we must create new ways of

relating to one another that are not oppressive but respecting of each other's wants, needs, and wishes. We must open up the channels of communication. There is a hell-of-a-lot of work to be done in understanding and researching the various aspects of Black sexuality. Some of this work may be painful, but out of this pain will come a necessary growth.

I thank my sisters Yvonne, Lorraine, and Hattie for helping us resist the oppression by sharing their insights with me on Black sexuality. I'd also like to thank Salsa Soul Sisters.

1. T. Obinkaram Echewa, "African Sexual Attitudes," *Essence* (March 1981), pp. 55-56.
2. Yvonne Flowers, "Homophobia—and the Fear of Homosexuals in the Black Community," presented at Annual Spring Conference, New York Association of Black Psychologists (1978).

Sylvia Witts Vitale is a sex therapist and educator, graduate of New York University, and a lecturer at various CUNY colleges.



# Variety Is the Spice of Life

Muriel Dimen

In our culture, sexuality is part of an unfinished dialectic which causes personal pain and social conflict, and keeps erotic pleasure within predictable bounds. At once completely personal and completely political, sexuality is a frontier whose exploration will lead to resolutions of contradictions in feminist and leftist theory and practice. For even as it entails issues of the psyche and individual autonomy, it also involves matters of collectivity and revolution, and so joins consciousness and public life. It makes us examine and want to change domestic arrangements, structures of social reproduction, intimacy. This alternately exciting and troubling prospect means altering the ground on which we stand, the ground which has supported us during all other struggles.

It is alleged that Picasso, when asked to name the greatest living painter, replied, "On what day?" Sexual experience and form are as contingent. Sexual feeling, ideation, and behavior are multidimensional. They vary from person to person, cul-

ture to culture, era to era. And every orgasm is different.

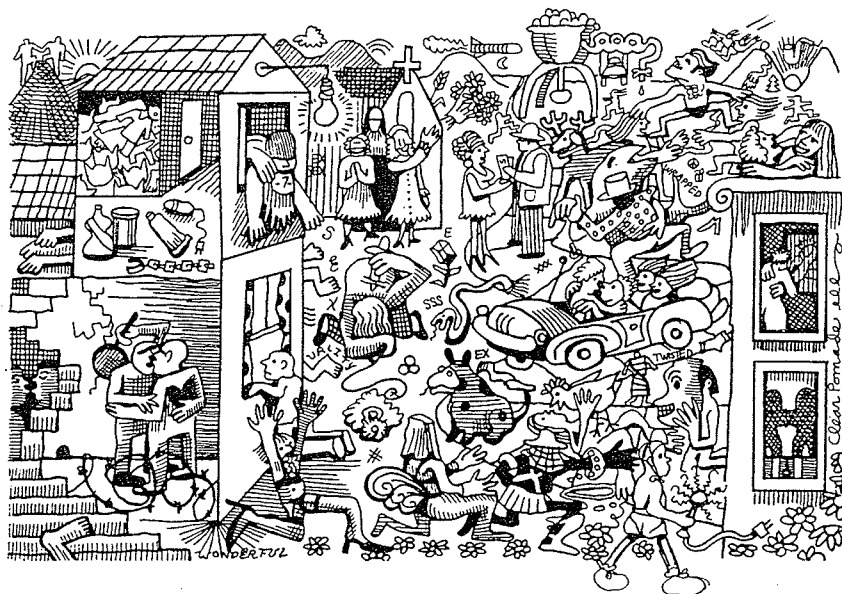
Yet sexuality, like painting and politics, perdures in time and space. We need to take account of both its continuity and its variety, of the tension between what it seems to be and what it might become. Sexuality appears to us Westerners to be made of a confusing tangle of culture, psyche, and nature. It becomes as much symbol as anything else. It stands for joy and conflict, social connection and individual self-realization, public life and private experience, freedom and imprisonment, security and risk, our limits and our potential. This complex variety mirrors that of our intrapsychic and social lives.

Sexuality, in other words, is various. We Westerners know this, yet, to our paralyzing confusion, we fear to follow out its implications. I will not examine here this variousness in biology—in humans and nonhuman nature<sup>1</sup>—but will go straight to the heart of the matter. Recent work indicating a great deal of cross-cultural sexual variation suggests that our

sexual self-knowledge is created not so much by nature as by culture. Coming, humanly, from inside a culture, we can view and experience sexuality only to the limits of the cultural spectacles we wear; at their edges, our vision blurs. We need to refine our outlook so as to see what else may exist. For our culture creates a double-bind—on the one hand encouraging us to explore and embrace our uncharted sexual totality, on the other treating that unknown territory as if it were already mapped and found dangerously unfit for human habitation, so that our curiosity comes to seem at best foolish and at worst immoral.

Western research itself, for example, sees sexuality as a technicolor spectrum of biology, experience, psychology, behavior, society, ideation. The spectrum starts with the more social, shades imperceptibly into the psychological, and lastly becomes biological: gender role, sexual activity, sensuality, sexual orientation, choice of partner, sexual ideology, fantasy, pleasure, desire, gender identity, reproduction. In individuals, according to sexologists John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, there are at least 12 important and distinct dimensions to sexuality: chromosomes; fetal gonads; fetal hormones; genital dimorphism; neurological dimorphism; observed behavior; body image; juvenile and adult gender identity; and pubertal hormones, erotics, and morphology.<sup>2</sup> The individual variability in genitals, secondary sex characteristics, and gender psychology reported by social psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna suggests that adult gender variation is "polymorphic" rather than "dimorphic"; that is, there are perhaps many genders rather than only two.<sup>3</sup> And gender variation, or its lack, is culturally shaped; as anthropologist Gayle Rubin conceptualizes it, sexuality is most inclusively structured by a sex/gender system.<sup>4</sup>

The preceding enumeration says,



Diane Sipprelle. *SSSexuality*.

Diane Sipprelle, an artist, graphic artist, and printer, lives in NYC.



Vesta Tilley as a formally dressed gentleman.

in a sense, what sexuality *is* for us. We create such lists in order to comprehend the things that, according to our culture, constitute sexuality. But this analytic dissection also tends to preclude what might be; we do not see what it does not encompass. Most important, its representation of aspects of sexuality as if they were disconnected segments tends, despite our best and most radical efforts, to reify the parts of a potentially whole phenomenon. In real life, sexuality tends to involve all of these parts all of the time; indeed, it is this capacity to integrate so much of life that creates the pleasurable diffuseness of sexual activity. We need to put these parts together again in order to understand sexuality in its proper location in society and personal experience, and so perhaps make real its emergently integral relation to both.

Still, this dissection accurately reflects the internally divided, constrained, and, so, narrowed sexual whole which our Western culture creates. On the one hand, our ideology has historically alienated sexual activity from us, saying it is to be not for itself but for the production of something: sex is for making babies. The organization of sexuality then puts control of reproduction in the hands of the state; the state, through laws on abortion and sterilization, controls the public results of sexuality. On the other hand, our recent ideology has reified nonreproductive sexual activity by making sexual experience seem to produce the ultimate in ecstasy and pleasure. But the social organization of sexuality makes this impossible by couching the symbols of pleasure in

male terms, putting the control of sexual behavior in male hands, and so limiting the realization of authentic female desire.

Not all cultures are like ours, which allows grand hopes for sexuality while creating straitened forms for it. Even if most cultures emphasize and reward approximations to an ideal of two distinct genders, some permit greater variation. In the Navajo three-gender system, for example, genitally normal females and males make up two genders. Genital hermaphrodites, called "real *nadle*," and genitally normal individuals who chose to "pretend they are *nadle*" constitute a third gender. Real *nadle* never marry; other *nadle* may select either a male or female spouse, may perform all tasks except hunting and waging war, and are in some respects treated as women (whose legal status is higher than men's).<sup>5</sup> In other two-gender systems, as among the Tuken of Kenya, sexual activity is matter-of-factly integrated into daily life. There, both genders may freely discuss heterosexual erotic desire and experience in each other's presence as long as there are no persons present who are inappropriate as bedmates on the grounds of kinship, political alliance, or age-set membership.<sup>6</sup> In Europe, courtship and marriage customs vary according to class.<sup>7</sup> Others, like the contemporary communist Chinese, may narrow sexuality even more by ideological denials and

intrapsychic repression of the urgency and importance of sexual desire.

In late capitalist patriarchy, the dearly espoused cultural ideas of male/female differences gloss over observed individual variability. This slippage creates psychic stress, generates social frenzy about the expression or non-expression of sexuality, and encourages us to produce reasonable facsimiles of the ideals. Our ideology and practice of sex roles construct, out of what are only tendencies toward genetal dimorphism, two mutually exclusive categories, that is, genders.<sup>8</sup> The dress and behavior codes of our culture try to hide the full range of diversity in order to create an appearance of dimorphism. Think of what some of us (women perhaps more than men) put on, such as makeup and skirts, padded shoulders and wigs; and take off, such as body hair and frowns, or long fingernails and tender expressions, in order to reduce our personal divergences from the dimorphic ideal of two distinct genders. But the coverage is incomplete and we must piece together the gender people want to be taken for. As Esther Newton notes, in order to look like women, male transvestites don the same attire and makeup that females do in order to match the culture's image for them.<sup>9</sup>

Industries make millions from these efforts to approximate the culture's fantastic images of sexual perfection. And adolescents go nearly



Lyn Hughes. *Odalisque*. Lyn Hughes is a visual anthropologist living in NYC.



Photo by Carol Harmel. Carol Harmel is a photographer and founding member of Artemisia.

crazy over them, for the acquisition of gender forms is a major part of the process by which infants grow to adulthood. Maturation is culturally informed, entailing in all cultures sexual variation in the form of metamorphoses in gender identity, gender roles, and erotic experience.

For example, in our culture, our erotic desires shift from our infantile diffuse or "polymorphous" sensuality—babies love to suck their toes and smear their feces on themselves—all throughout our juvenile, adolescent, and adult years. And we change as adults—the lover or sexual experience we chose 10 years ago may not be the one we want 10 years from now. In our culture, too, the sexual sequence changes generationally: in one generation, adolescents necked and adults slept together; in the next, juveniles make out, adolescents make it, and adults swing. Psychological, social, and structural changes proceed unevenly, often out of step. And all this takes place both consciously and out of our awareness.

Yet our culture insists that adulthood entail a transformation in the direction of increasingly limited experience.<sup>10</sup> In other words, what has been called "repression" is shaped by and the servant of social forms of domination, such as rigid social roles; sexual orientations; alienated labor; and class, race, gender, and other hierarchies. Although every culture may need to differentiate between child and adult, human culture need not cut experience short as ours does.

A narrowed sexuality is required only where a *cultural* gulf is actually created between child and adult. An oceanic sexuality narrows into sexual straits only under those social conditions where maturation means we must forget about play in order to embrace work, only where work and play split time, space, and meaning between them, as in entrepreneurial, corporate, monopoly, and state capitalism.

In our culture, the metamorphosis by which children become sexual adults begins in and is organized most immediately by familial and domestic institutions where social/sexual taboos, the sex/gender system, and the structure of society meet. Less sense-perceptible but equally influential, the political and economic institutions which contextualize domestic ones—the schools, church, media, workplace, state—exact grudging, tortured compliance with the artificial divides between work and play, child and adult, male and female. The person, trying to stay on the proper side of the divides, becomes divided inside. And in the gaps, sexuality—fragmented, exciting, troubling, haunting—gets lost and so seeks a home everywhere.

Sexuality narrows in small, graduated steps. The incest taboo drives home sexual repression and sends the child out of the home into society. The socially constructed sex/gender system, which participates in organizing the work of social reproduction and material production, as well as the development of personal identity, so routinizes private life as to exclude the

childlike spirit of play in which sexuality thrives. The gender hierarchy and the gendered division of labor between domestic and political spheres thereby remove sexuality from the privacy of personal control and place it in the public domain.

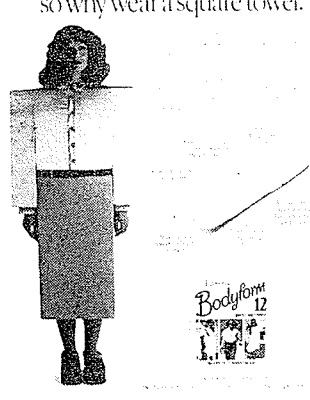
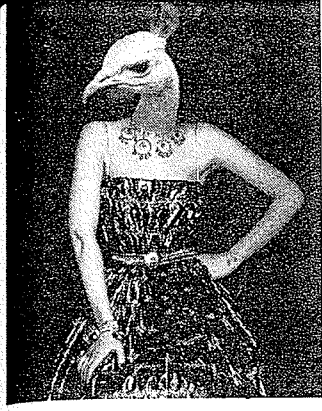
Sexuality then runs to the frontiers of individual fantasy, the public media, and leisure-time playlands. There it is captured, commoditized, and tamed by exchange-value which markets it as a new product in its line of endless choice and possibility, appealing to our desires for our dormant polymorphous sensuality. Packaged masculinist pornography leashes the wild, boundary-breaking violence of sex to routinized, boundary-preserving images of violation. Romantic novels, mass-produced for women stuck in private isolation, housebreak sexuality through rose-colored visions of psychically violent love in exotic places. Est and other adjustive therapies sanitize sexuality by rationalizing desire. The media train sexuality by holding out (on) that great big orgasm in the sky that each of us could have if only we bought the right vibrator or found the right (wo)man.

The origins of domination are dialectical. The individualized economic order and the hierarchies of power use sexuality as a means for politico-economic inequality and domination by identifying us in a one-dimensional sexual way. This partitioning of our selves, which are always striving for wholeness, allows the realization in our persons of the reification embedded in society's power hierarchies, and so recreates domination within us.

The workplace constructs sexuality differently for males and females, gays and straights. Women can lose their jobs by either complaining about or complying with sexual harassment, while for men the wielding of sexual power may be, if not merely unwise, part of the wielding of economic power. Discrimination by gender, such as unequal pay for equal work, reemphasizes the gender hierarchy implicit in female-assigned child-rearing, and creates a new hierarchy on the job. Compulsory heterosexuality adds a third cross-cutting hierarchy by punishing homosexual preferences with loss of or exclusion from jobs. People begin to experience not only their sexuality, but their selves, as stunted and stunting.

The state's compression of sexual activity, and so its diminishing of our

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selves, is even more fine-tuned. Homo-  
 phobic laws section the public expres-  
 sion of our desire, distorting our pri-  
 vate experience, our knowledge of self  
 and other, and so our intimacies. Laws  
 that restrict access to contraception  
 and abortions, and open the way to  
 sterilization for Third World and  
 working-class women, bear down on  
 the results of heterosexual intercourse.  
 Coupled with the corporate refusal to  
 develop safe, aesthetic contraception  
 for both genders, this state of affairs  
 saddles females with reproductive  
 issues which influence their sexual  
 facts and fantasies in ways males can-  
 not share. Similarly, it presents gay  
 people with social and psychological  
 problems which straight people can  
 barely imagine. Across these barriers,  
 people gaze at one another with mis-  
 trust and longing, their desire thwarted  
 by envy, their rage and fear bottled up  
 by need.

Our cramped, reified selves be-  
 come useful to the compartmentalized,  
 hierarchized social structure—to work-  
 place, state, media, and sex/gender  
 system. The economic system is tied to  
 corporate profits, not social desires. It  
 needs people of all classes who need  
 not only material means of survival—a  
 paycheck for alienated labor—but also  
 psychic/ideological ones—authoritari-  
 an sets of rules to define their activities  
 and identities. The state too attempts  
 to ensure our dependency by reducing  
 us to flies stuck on bureaucratic red  
 tape. State and economy are very well  
 served by patriarchy, which enables  
 them to speak of corporations and na-  
 tions as (male-dominated) “families,”  
 and to inscribe us in their records as,

among other things, female or male,  
 head of household or not, single, mar-  
 ried, or divorced.

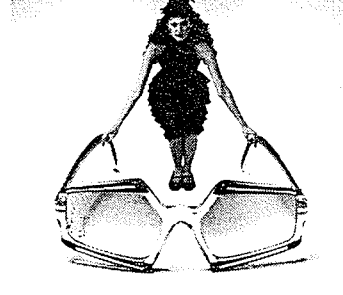
Patriarchal ideology and authori-  
 tarian practices can thereby tie us, too,  
 to profits, even as we seem to be work-  
 ing in our own interests. Defined by  
 sexual parts of our selves, we become  
 less than our selves, and our potential  
 for autonomous daily redefinition of  
 existence comes to seem, or to be, di-  
 minished. The workplace itself, which  
 circumscribes our activities and deci-  
 sions for 10 hours a day, 52 weeks a  
 year, and 70 years of a lifetime, pre-  
 fabricates choices and performs func-  
 tions for us which become increasingly  
 difficult for us to do alone as we be-  
 come more stunted by social/sexual  
 domination.

The media also thrive on people  
 whose ability to experience themselves  
 as powerful and to act powerfully has  
 been diminished by sexual reification.  
 The media thicken the mystification  
 and intensify the rigidity with which  
 we are categorized, thereby setting us  
 up for manipulation by advertising  
 and political propaganda. The media  
 concretize the thin abstractions of our  
 sexual selves by uncritically replicating  
 the familiar cultural ideals and images  
 of nature which construct masculinity  
 and femininity. This replication sedu-  
 ces us into accepting our sexual  
 straits by reaffirming the part-identity  
 which our culture has given each of us  
 and which each of us has come to  
 value, willingly or not.

Our sex/gender system, by dis-  
 tinguishing rigidly between two gen-  
 ders, makes each gender live out only  
 some of human possibility and so re-

quires each to need one of the other  
 gender to make a (presumably) whole  
 person.<sup>11</sup> Capitalist patriarchy orga-  
 nizes production and reproduction  
 by splitting them and so constructing  
 part-people. It makes the work of the  
 domestic domain the work of women,  
 even if it also demands that women  
 join men at the workplace. By relegat-  
 ing the work of social reproduction to  
 a supposedly “private” sphere, capi-  
 talist patriarchy treats it as a leftover.  
 In other words, it demeans the rearing  
 of the next generation, assigns this de-  
 meaninging work materially and/or sym-  
 bolicly to females, roots female self-  
 esteem in it, excludes males from it,  
 burdens lone women in isolated nu-  
 clear families with it, denigrates alter-  
 natives to the nuclear family (such as  
 extended families or creative day-care  
 centers), and trivializes it by cate-  
 gorizing it with other apparent irrele-  
 vancies like play and domesticity.

By making part-people of females  
 and males, the dualistic gender system  
 makes us fear and loathe both our  
 selves and others. We come therefore  
 to fear as alien and unsettling a sexu-  
 ality which might put us in true touch  
 with all parts of our selves and with  
 others. And so we keep sexuality—with  
 its impulse toward integration—a  
 stranger by rushing gratefully into  
 gender's containing walls. Outside  
 these walls, uncontained by the domes-  
 tic origins of intimacy and banned by  
 the public places of work and power,  
 sexuality becomes alienated from the  
 body/psyche in which it arose. Its  
 frightening strangeness, a result of the  
 sexual narrowing of our maturation,  
 infuses sexual orientation, gender



identity, gender role, and sexual ideology. In other words, the learning of sexual repression is also the learning of one's place in gender stratification, as well as the learning of the reification of self, other, and passion.

The gulfs between male and female, child and adult, work and play, self and other, domesticate "passion" by calling it love, harnessing love to monogamous heterosexual marriage, and embedding marriage in the nuclear family. The family's rules and expectations channel sexuality into ceremony and routinize passion by eliminating our power to embrace or resist it. They advertise the socially structured need of adult males and females for each other as biologically (because reproductively) based, therefore seemingly eternal and unquestionable. The family's ideology hammers ever deeper the partialness of our experience, sending even more subliminal messages. Not only must one find one's completion in an other of the opposite gender; but one's completion lies ultimately *in*, and never beyond, the nuclear family. And the monogamous heterosexual nuclear family conceals its own incompleteness. For it is only one variety of domestic life. Other varieties include same-sex couples, single-person units, friends living together, communes, extended families, communitarian institutions, prisons, schools, hospitals, and the servant-filled domiciles of the rich. And families and domestic units are only parts of more inclusive and varied structures, those of the public sphere—economy; politics, ethnic, sexual, and racial communities; the ecosystem itself.

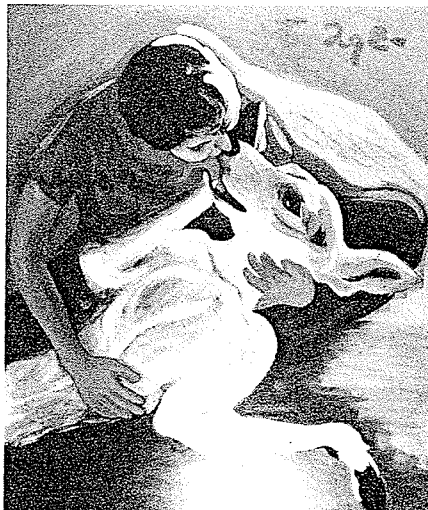
Part of the process of resisting this narrowed and fragmenting sexuality is creating new public structures. Here women have created a feminist community which has attempted to recapture sexuality, to "liberate" it from political and economic and ideological exploitation, and so to return it to our personal control by redefining, reconstructing, and setting it free again. To do this, we have had to find out what we want, and this has forced us to look at what we actually do. What we have found is great variety and uncertainty.

We must not let this uncertainty and diversity frighten us into participating in the very processes that limit our powers and nullify our resistance. Often our anger at male dominance gets short-circuited into an anti-sexu-

ality, a tendency which is another form of sexual constriction and social domination. It is incumbent on us, rather, to create a vision of an authentic female/feminine sexuality, of what *we* want. But this will require us to rethink and reexperiment in ways that may seem forbidden and heretical.

For example, do we want promiscuity? Perhaps more than anything else, promiscuity symbolizes sexual variety to us in our time and culture. Most cultures, most of the time, have offered men a greater mobility and familiarity with, and so rights to, the public domain, including, if it exists in the culture, sexual promiscuity. Our sex/gender system has not permitted women to be promiscuous in the way that men are. And most cultures, most of the time, have given to women private intimacy with the self and near others, a more intricate and varied psychological experience—emotional promiscuity, if you will.<sup>12</sup> And our culture has not allowed men to be emotionally promiscuous.

We know that female sexual turf and male emotional range need expansion. But can women in our time and culture be promiscuous in the way that men are? Can women, without becoming de-gendered, want the balance-shifting access to varied, spontaneous, passionate, even recreational sexual activity? Can men become emotionally complex? Can they turn in and find in themselves that intimacy with self and other which is now locked into femininity? Do we want them to? Do we care if they can? Are female and male shifts mutually dependent, or is an assumption of mutual dependence part of an outmoded dualistic sex/gender system badly in need of an overhaul?



Fran Winant. *The Kiss* (1979). Acrylic & oil. 56" x 46" Fran Winant is a poet and painter.

We do not yet know what we need and want and are able to do. Together and separately, we must begin to imagine our own sexual utopias. We must expect to have to consider unexpected variation. Our journey cannot stop with the exchange of parts between women and men, gays and straights, for there is more to sexuality than two genders or two kinds of affectional preference, just as there is more to psychic and social wholeness than what is found in adults, in the nuclear family, in our own or any culture. Heterosexuals and homosexuals, child and adult, simple societies and complex ones, divide up experience and form among them, as does membership in families and collectivities. And in the divisions perhaps something is lost. We know there is more than we know, and we must set out to create what we lack. The end of the journey will therefore be but a beginning, a variable construction of sex and gender, offering metamorphosis, choice, uncertainty.

Many have helped me to develop this paper. I particularly want to thank Carol Ascher, Beth Jaker, Rayna Rapp, Arnold Sachar, and Paula Webster.

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2. John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt, *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).
3. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender* (New York: Wiley, 1978).
4. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-211.
5. Lila Leibowitz, *Females, Males, Families* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1978), p. 67.
6. Bonnie Kettel, personal communication. See also Bonnie and David Kettel, "The Tuken of Western Kenya Highlands," *Cultural Source Materials for Population Planning in Eastern Africa*, ed. Angela Malnos (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), pp. 354-427.
7. Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, "A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (forthcoming).
8. Kessler and McKenna, Ch. 1.
9. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
10. Ernst Schachtel describes the process of "childhood amnesia" by which this happens in *Metamorphosis* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).
11. Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).
12. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 198.

Muriel Dimen, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Lehman College (CUNY) and an analytic candidate in the New York University program, wrote *The Anthropological Imagination*.

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# Sexual Imperialism

## The Case of Indian Women in Britain

Rekha Basu

For many women of color, questions of economic, political, social, and sexual development cannot be discussed in isolation from one another. Because much of our historical experience has been characterized by imperialist domination, our attempts at self-realization are intrinsically connected to the broader struggle for autonomy, dignity, and recognition. Regaining control over our own sexuality and overcoming the sexual stigmas that surround us are prerequisites to defining personal sexual expression.

Racial, class, and national domination has often been effected by sexual assaults on women. Indeed, Third World women's sexuality has often been the target of attacks aimed at asserting overall authority and keeping the victim in a state of complete emo-

tional and physical dependency. As Third World women, our sexuality has been subject to public scrutiny and judgment. We are viewed as either oversexed or asexual, immoral or puritanical. We are denied the right to sexual privacy as well as the freedom to make our own sexual choices. Either way, we must struggle to make our sexuality exclusively our own domain.

### "Only Virgins Need Apply"

In February 1979, a 35-year-old Indian woman traveled from New Delhi to London with her fiancé, an Indian businessman already settled in England. On arriving at London airport, the woman was sent to the infirmary by the immigration officer on duty. There she was ordered to undress and had to stand naked for half an

hour until the doctor arrived. The woman did not know what was happening to her. During the wait, she asked for a robe to cover herself with; she also requested a woman doctor if she was going to be examined. Both requests were denied. A male doctor examined her internally and asked her if she had ever been pregnant. She was embarrassed and frightened, as she had never before had a gynecological examination.

When it was over, she was informed that the test had been conducted to determine whether she was a virgin and thus verify that she was engaged to the man with whom she was traveling. Had the test indicated that she was not a virgin, it would have been assumed that she was not his fiancée, but already married. In that case, she



learned, she would have been deported back to India.

The woman related her experience to a reporter from Britain's *Manchester Guardian*, which publicized the case. In both India and England, women's groups waged demonstrations and demanded an investigation. Finally, the Indian government delivered an official protest to the British government.

Apparently examinations of this nature had been routinely conducted for over a decade on Asian and other women of color entering Britain, despite the lack of any provision for them in the British Immigration Act. It seems that immigration officials had the license to do whatever they pleased in individual cases. "These tests are designed to help immigration officers determine whether claims of intended marriage to British residents are genuine," a British government spokesman reported. "An immigration officer may not be satisfied that a passenger is who he or she says they are, and may think they are seeking admission by deception. In this case, the officer referred the passenger to the port medical examiner to see if she was, in fact, a bona fide virgin or fiancée. After a cursory examination, the medical officer said these suspicions could be removed." Implicit in this reasoning that a woman who was not a virgin must already be married was a mandate that Indian women could not have sexual relations before marriage.

Numerous cases involving sexual examinations of Asian women have been documented in *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*.<sup>1</sup> One 16-year-old Pakistani girl was sent to Britain for a marriage arranged by her parents and arrived in her wedding clothes. Two officers at the airport detained and examined her and then declared that she couldn't be 16 and was thus too young to marry. She was locked up in a detention center for several weeks before being sent back to Pakistan. In another case, an 18-year-old arrived with her husband in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She was sexually examined and then locked up at the airport detention center. As a result, she gave birth prematurely and the baby died. In other instances, parents have disowned their daughters because of the disgrace when they are sent home for not being virgins.

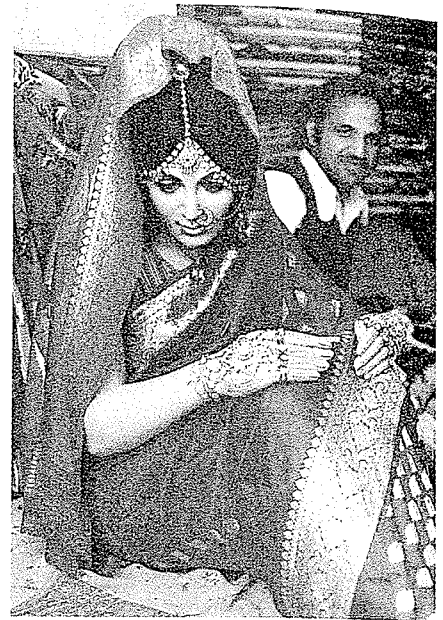
Sexual examinations have also been administered on young women who are not engaged or married, as well as on older women whose children have

settled in England. Young girls have been given VD tests and had their pubic hair shaved. Some have been told that they were too old to be dependent children of their resident parents. A few older women have reported having their breasts examined, supposedly to determine their ages. Such tests have been conducted not only at the airport but also at the British Embassy in New Delhi on Indian women applying for visas to England.

Embarrassment and fear of harassment have led most women to remain silent about their experiences. "I was most reluctant to have the examination but I didn't know whether it was normal practice here," reported the woman whose case was finally brought to public attention. She had signed a consent form agreeing to "a gynecological examination which might be internal if necessary" because she feared being sent back to India if she did not comply.

Although these incidents were brought to public attention several years ago, they were given virtually no coverage in the American press. The Indian government's response was moderate and was made only after demonstrations and outbursts of grievances. National Indian women's organizations, such as the All India Women's Conference and the National Federation of Indian Women, initially joined protests already under way, but were soon placated by invitations to tea at the British Embassy.<sup>2</sup> Even the organizations charged with safeguarding Indian interests in England were grossly negligent in responding to the episodes when they were reported. Immigrant-welfare agencies in London had apparently been aware of such incidents since as far back as 1968. In that year alone, the Indian Workers Association recorded eight cases. The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants had issued a complaint to the British Home Secretary, who promised to take action to halt the examinations but later denied the charges altogether.

These glib attitudes, along with the incidents themselves, point to the universally low position of Asian and other Third World women, and the lack of privacy accorded to us in sexual matters. Not only were the virginity and other tests part of a racist policy the British perpetrated solely against women of color, but Indian government representatives failed to defend their citizens because the victims were women, and thus the magnitude of the of-



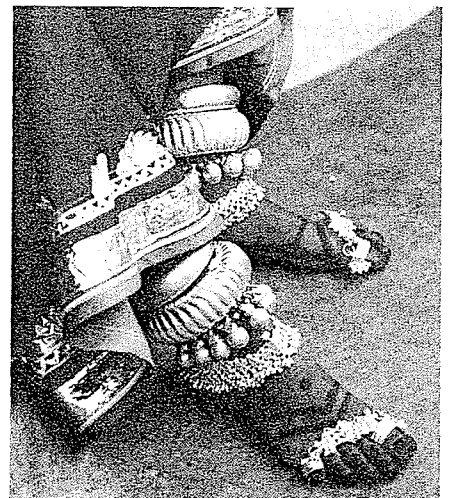
Doranne Jacobson. *Mannequin in Bridal Dress*. From *Asia* (Nov./Dec. 1980).

fense was perceived as relatively minor.

It is alone an outrage that women of color should be treated by different standards than white female immigrants, that we should be accused of trying to enter a country by deception and then forced to undergo tests intended to prove our dishonesty. It is even more preposterous that the British government should decide what is proper sexual behavior for us and shape its policies accordingly. It is tragic that Asian women have been forced to endure and internalize this humiliating treatment for years in silence.

### The Unstated Aims

What was the real objective of this British practice? Was it, in fact, to detect illegitimate immigrants? Any way one looks at it, the racist and sexist im-



Doranne Jacobson, *Bride's Feet*. From *Asia* (Nov./Dec. 1980). Doranne Jacobson is a research associate in Columbia University's Southern Asian Institute and a photographer.

plications of this policy are astounding. First of all, it is impossible to determine virginity through an internal examination. More absurd, however, is the connection between these tests and the decision on immigration. Apparently a woman's past sexual life is to be the sole determinant of her right to immigrate. Here Asian women are expected to conform to standards of morality that the British do not demand of their own female citizens or white immigrants. Not only have the British promoted such cultural stereotypes, but they now enforce them as requirements for entry. Moreover, there is no consideration that if a woman is denied entry, she will be subjected to public humiliation, sent home in disgrace, and will probably never be able to marry.

One must also consider that these tests served several larger purposes. Through them, the British could subtly limit immigration, while maintaining their image as a liberal democracy with an open immigration policy. Ironically, most Indians were originally encouraged to come to England, as they provided a source of cheap labor during the economic boom of the 1950's and 60's. Yet this surplus labor force becomes unwanted during recessionary periods. By the mid-1960's, Indians represented a sizable presence in England and the British government began to enact legislation to restrict their influx. Indian workers were given entry permits that tied them to specific jobs — usually the lowest paying, with the poorest working conditions. It became harder for the families of workers to immigrate with them. The various Immigration Acts also accorded immigration officials with increased powers of deportation, to be used at their own discretion.

The British government thus devised indirect ways of expelling Indians who were not altogether necessary to the economy. Women were the most vulnerable sector of the Indian population, and their sexuality was made a target of attack. Virginity tests were used not only to restrict immigration but to deliberately humiliate women. Indian women were particularly susceptible to this because of repressive sexual attitudes within India, attitudes the British were not only well aware of but had themselves helped to perpetuate during the colonial period.

### The Scope of Sexual Colonization

Such violation of the Indian woman's right to sexual privacy is representative of attitudes toward Third World women historically, throughout the world. Our sexuality has been assaulted and our sexual freedom robbed. In Africa, during the slave trade, white settlers raped native women and enacted on them the repressed sexual fantasies they would never have imposed on their wives; then they stigmatized these women for being immoral. In the U.S., Afro-American, Hispanic, and Native American women have been forcibly sterilized and used as guinea pigs for scientific experimentation. In many parts of the U.S. a Hispanic woman cannot get an abortion unless she agrees to be sterilized. Afro-Americans were the first in the U.S. to be given birth control pills, before they were mass-marketed, in an obvious attempt to curb the Black population.

All these practices deny Third World women control over our bodies and sexual functions. Many of them are carried out by governments which champion women's rights and send representatives to United Nations con-

ferences on International Women's Year. Sexual strategies have provided an easy vehicle for implementing campaigns of repression toward a subject population. Women are the easiest victims of racial and class antagonisms, and thus in many of the assaults against poor and Third World peoples women have been the targets.

In India, organized resistance to sexual assaults has begun to grow and active campaigns are taking place against rape, the forced dowry system and resulting dowry deaths,<sup>3</sup> and other crimes against women. Women are no longer looking to the government or the bureaucratic women's organizations to espouse their interests, but are holding demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts to express their grievances and bring a halt to these practices. Women throughout the world must continue to play an active role to end such atrocities against us, and to crush the dehumanizing conceptions of women which are at their root.

1. Amrit Wilson, *Finding a Voice* (London: Virago, 1978).

2. Representatives of national women's organizations and female journalists paid a visit to the British Embassy in New Delhi, supposedly to conduct an investigation and convey a protest, but they ended up having tea and snacks and enjoying a social visit instead.

3. The traditional dowry system, still very much in effect in India, requires that a bride's family give a large sum of money in cash and gifts to the bridegroom's family at the time of marriage. (The practice amounts to buying a husband from his family.) Recently, many cases of "dowry deaths" have been reported, whereby the family of the husband kills the bride for not providing a large-enough dowry. The husbands are often accomplices in these murders.

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Anti-dowry demonstration organized by NFIW. From *Manushi*.

# *I Hear Voices But See No Faces*

## *Reflections on Racism and Woman-Identified Relationships of Afro-American Women*

Vickie M. Mays

On campus recently I passed two young Black women walking together. Their interaction with each other carried an air of intimacy and familiarity. They interrupted their conversation long enough to exchange an acknowledging nod with me but quickly returned to their talk. I watched as one woman playfully pushed the other; they both laughed. As I walked on, I thought about our brief interaction. I began to question why I see so many more Euro-American women than Afro-American women whose lesbianism is visibly evident. Other questions began to flood my mind. Do lesbian relationships take a different form in the Black culture? What are the socio-political conditions that facilitate the "outness" of lesbians, and how do these differ for Black and white women? Why is it that the Black lesbian seems to be "invisible" in the United States? These questions began to form the basis for these notes on the impact of racism on the Afro-American lesbian.

My basic premise is that the climate created by a Euro-American world philosophy of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy has kept the Afro-American lesbian invisible. It is this Euro-American philosophy that has resulted in Afro-American lesbians being less visible in comparison to Euro-American lesbians. The Afro-American lesbian's invisibility appears to be even more deliberate when one comes to know the herstory of woman-identified marriages by African women before Euro-American colonization. This invisibility can be seen in the Afro-American lesbian's realistic fears and trepidations for her existence and safety if she openly acknowledges her lesbianism. This invisibility is manifested by the impact of the multiple oppressions of capitalism, racism, and sexism which leave the Afro-American woman with the illusion that equality, power, and privilege are possible if heterosexuality is chosen as a lifestyle. Moreover, this invisibility is perpetuated by the lack

of a significant body of literature reflecting a Black feminist or Black lesbian-feminist ideology, as well as by the silencing of the herstory of woman-identified relationships in Africa. Such knowledge could guide the Afro-American lesbian in strengthening and building a visible and viable Black lesbian community. This visibility has the potential to facilitate an overall alliance in the Black community, possibly eradicating the feeling of alienation experienced by the Black lesbian.

Increasing numbers of Afro-American women are discovering a herstorical past of woman-identified relationships among African women. Audre Lorde, for example, describes a tribe in West Africa, the Fon of Dahomey, in which 13 forms of marriage exist.<sup>1</sup> One of these is called "giving the goat to the buck." It is a marriage in which a woman of independent means marries another woman. They become co-wives. One of the co-wives may bear children by a male, but all children will be controlled by the co-wives and their heirs. While some of these marriages are entered into to allow women of means to continue to control their economic resources and jural authority, others are clearly lesbian marriages.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers, and often these are Euro-American women, have attempted to deny lesbianism as a possible explanation for these marriages.<sup>3</sup> One such researcher negates the positive choice in these woman-to-woman marriages and describes them as occurring between "women who are unable to lead satisfying lives in man-woman marriage."<sup>4</sup> Yet this same researcher quotes an African woman, who let it be known to her friends that she was interested in marrying a "woman of good character and a hard worker." As the African woman put it: "A man who borrows money for beer from a woman is useless as a husband-father. I could not walk into such unhappiness with my eyes wide open."<sup>5</sup> This woman

already had two children, so clearly her decision to enter into a woman marriage was not based on her barrenness. Nor was she a woman of means. (These are the "excuses" usually given by researchers for woman-to-woman marriages.)

Woman-to-woman marriages are much more widespread than history wishes to acknowledge. This form of marriage is found in northern Nigeria among the Yoruba, Yagoba, Akoko, Nupe, and Gana-Gana communities. It has been reported in southern Nigeria among the Iba and the Kalabari. Other tribes with woman-to-woman marriages include the Dinkas', the Barendra of the northern Transvaal, the Neurs, the Lovedu, and the Kamba in East Africa. I am sure the list will go on as we are able to uncover and write our own herstory.

The point I wish to stress here is that lesbian bonding by African women does herstorically exist. Lesbian relationships are recognized as legitimate social relationships in certain African societies. What kind of social structure and world view characterizes these particular African societies? My guess is that these societies are based on an *African* ideology that stresses interconnectedness and flexibility in relationships and roles.<sup>6</sup>

Such an orientation contrasts with the Euro-American framework in which the family has been defined as a closed nuclear unit and structured in a way that maintains patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>7</sup> In particular in the U.S., Black women have been used as the backbone for the building of economic growth. It is in the interests of Euro-Americans that Afro-American women should not know of their lesbian heritage. Instead, the wish is that they remain controlled and defined within a capitalist-patriarchal social structure.

Afro-American women as a group must struggle to exist in a social system in which being Black and female is de-

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fined as being powerless and inferior. As Barbara Smith so aptly points out, "Self-definition is a dangerous activity for any woman to engage in, especially a Black one."<sup>8</sup> There is an added danger in self-definition for the Afro-American lesbian in terms of the threat she poses for heterosexual males and females, both Black and white, and for non-Third World lesbians.

In the Black community lesbianism has traditionally been labeled as white, middle-class and bourgeois. It is viewed with distrust and contempt. Even today Black lesbians sometimes are derisively referred to as "bulldaggers." Moreover, the Afro-American lesbian who acknowledges or evidences her lesbianism may meet with a fury of violence from Black males. This abuse is qualitatively different from the abuse the Euro-American lesbian suffers at the hands of white or Black men.<sup>9</sup> As Marcia, a Black lesbian, describes it:

*Donna and I were walking down 3rd St. holding hands. We passed a bunch of guys as we were going on our way. They turned around and followed us for about 4 blocks. There were about 5 guys. When they caught up to us, one of them grabbed Donna by the arm and asked her what did she want with me. He said she was too fine to be a stud and he had something that would make her feel good. He put her hand on his dick. I tried my best to kick his ass. . . . Between he and his brothers I received a broken jaw and two broken ribs. Donna was in the hospital for two weeks with a concussion.<sup>10</sup>*

The reaction of Black males to Black women, especially those who are woman-identified, is based on the Black male's experience of racial oppression, capitalism, and male privilege—all of which define the Black woman as a commodity. She is one of the few things the Black male can "own" and control. Toni Cade attributes the antagonism between the Black male and the Black female to an acceptance of Euro-American capitalist and misogynist definitions of manhood and womanhood.<sup>11</sup> When the Afro-American woman, particularly a lesbian, rejects the Euro-American definition of womanhood, she shakes the foundation of the Black male's manhood, which is often defined as controlling the Black woman and making her subservient.

The Afro-American woman has been denied power and privilege. She has been raised expecting to work, as

she will need to assist in supporting her family. She will also be asked to do all she possibly can to advance the Black man and the Black race—at the cost of ignoring the oppression of sexism. Indeed, the Black woman has been taught from early childhood that one way to survive in this society is through marriage or in a male-female relationship. I agree with Barbara Smith when she writes:

*Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort. . . . I am convinced that it is our lack of privilege and power in every other sphere that allows so few Black women to make the leap that many white women, particularly. . . have been able to make this decade.<sup>12</sup>*

What Black men and some Black

women have failed to see is that the Afro-American woman who chooses to bond with another woman is an asset to the Black community. As Audre Lorde eloquently notes:

*Black women who define ourselves and our goals beyond the sphere of a sexual relationship can bring to any endeavor the realized focus of a complete and therefore empowered individual. Black women and Black men [should] recognize that the development of their particular strengths and interests does not diminish the other. . . . Black women sharing close emotional ties with each other, politically or economically, are not the enemies of Black men.<sup>13</sup>*

Traditionally, as Lorde points out Black women have always bonded together in support of each other. Black women are very woman-oriented in their relationships. The depth of feelings, love, kinship, and bonding



Last three surviving Amazons of Dahomey in 1937.

among Afro-American women runs very deep. One need only examine the strong grandmother-mother-daughter relationships and friendships of Afro-American women to see the quality of woman-loving in the Black community.

Yet the Black woman who openly bonds with another woman does not have the same types of support systems that are available to the Euro-American lesbian. The Afro-American lesbian who chooses to be visible often loses the support of her friends, her family, and the Black community. While the Euro-American lesbian may find support and a new family in the white lesbian community, the Afro-American lesbian loses a bond that is crucial to her vitality in her struggle as a Third World woman in a white racist patriarchal society. The Afro-American lesbian may adopt the predominantly white lesbian community as her support system, but she does so at the expense of integrating her Blackness with her lesbianism. This can leave her feeling fragmented. One need only read the excerpts of letters from Black feminists in the collection so appropriately titled: "I Am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understands."<sup>14</sup> Because of her invisibility the Afro-American lesbian does not easily find her true lesbian sisters.

Yet, despite her isolation, the Black lesbian is less likely to contemplate suicide than her white counterpart.<sup>15</sup> The Black lesbian's attitude is one of survival. A friend of mine calls this the "make do" syndrome, while I refer to it as "there's no such thing as can't." Historically, Black women have experienced some of the most brutal and adverse conditions imaginable, and they have survived. This survival resulted from a knowledge passed on through Black culture, which taught them an ethos of "you must." One need only read the words of Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Angela Davis to understand the characteristic survival of Black women.<sup>16</sup>

The Afro-American woman has rarely had the privilege to "cop out," as this would mean annihilation. I have at times heard Afro-American

lesbians, in regard to relationships with Euro-American lesbians, remark about being tired of "Miss Ann" behavior in interactions with Euro-American women. Some Euro-American lesbians have not been forced to analyze their political role in the social system or come to grips with their own oppressive behaviors. This becomes a source of frustration and tension for the Afro-American lesbian. Black women have been taught from an early age that life is a series of struggles; in order to make it, there is no such thing as "can't."

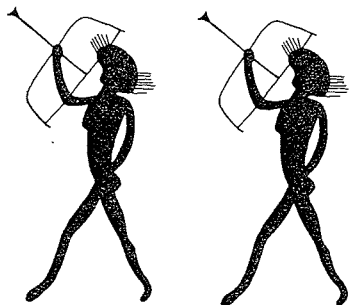
By virtue of her race, the Euro-American woman has a certain power and privilege in society not available to the Afro-American woman. Family connections, education, and wealth are all resources that may facilitate the visibility of the Euro-American lesbian. For instance, from an economic standpoint, the Euro-American woman may have the *time* to generate a body of lesbian-feminist ideology, or to build a support network through volunteer activities. The Afro-American lesbian, lacking these resources, finds herself without a women's center that supports her needs and without a body of literature that tells her about her lesbian sisters. What the Euro-American lesbian community can offer is a sharing of resources so that the Afro-American lesbian can build her own community and thus become visible. All too often, however, what the Afro-American lesbian has received is an invitation to help the Euro-American community work on its racism or relieve its guilt by becoming the token Black in its group. Lorraine Bethel's poem "What Chou Mean *WE*, White Girl?" clearly portrays the racism and classism in this behavior.<sup>17</sup>

Racism extends beyond individual attitudes to institutional and cultural structures. By remaining silent on this issue and failing to take an active stance, Euro-American women help to perpetuate Black women's oppression. My point here is not to "guilt-trip" Euro-American women but to energize them to use their limited privilege and economic resources to fight not only sexism but racism as well. If there is to be a cohesive lesbian-feminist movement, the Euro-American lesbian must recognize her racism and deal with her power and privilege in a manner that facilitates such a movement. The hope is for a visible and viable Black lesbian community, which will help produce the building of a united lesbian community.

This article is an edited version of a longer work which appears in *Top-Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community*, ed. Sara Bennett and Joan Gibbs (New York: February Third Press, 1980).

1. Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," *Black Scholar*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (April 1978), p. 34.
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3. Laura Bohannan, "Dahomean Marriage: A Reevaluation," *Africa*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1949), pp. 273-287; Eileen Jensen Krige, "Woman-Marriage, with Special Reference to the Lovendu—Its Significance for the Definition of Marriage," *Africa*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1974), pp. 11-37; Christine Obbo, "Dominant Male Ideology and Female Options: Three East African Case Studies," *Africa*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1976), pp. 371-389.
4. Obbo, p. 372.
5. Obbo, p. 374.
6. Wade Nobles, "Africanity: Its Role in Black Families," *The Black Family*, 2nd Ed., ed. Robert Staples (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1978), pp. 19-25.
7. Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London: Penguin, 1973).
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9. This is not to negate the fact that Euro-American lesbians also experience violence, but its incidence is lower and the avenues of recourse and protection are more numerous for white women. It is not unusual for a Black woman to call the police and have them never arrive.
10. Cynthia R. Cauthern, "Nine Hundred Black Lesbians Speak," *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 9, No. 6 (June 1979), p. 112.
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12. Smith, p. 40.
13. Lorde, p. 31.
14. Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "I Am Not Meant To Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978," *Conditions: Four*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1979), pp. 62-77.
15. Alan P. Bell and Martin Weinberg, *Homosexualities* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978).
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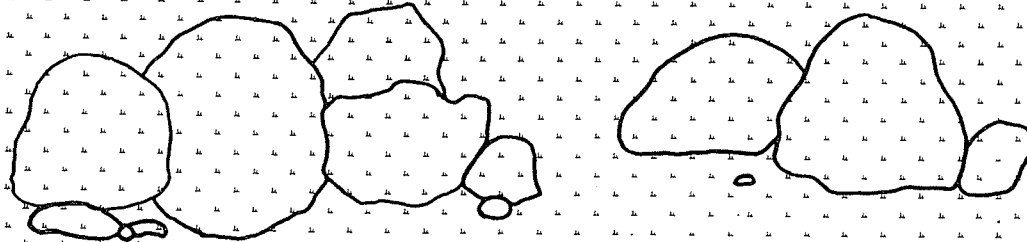


# I MET A WOMAN

Alesia Kunz

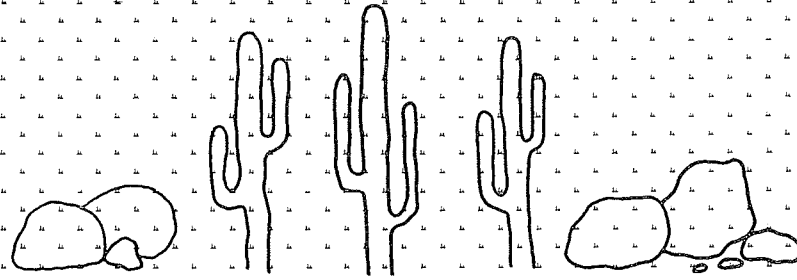
I met a woman whose colors I could not see. I met a woman whose colors I could not see. They were not apparent. I did not know if I liked her. We talked a little at first. There were other people. We talked a little back and forth. To each other. What I can say is that I didn't know if I liked her. We talked about my work some. She was stiff. Removed. We talked about her work. Some. She was stiff. Removed. Overworked attitudes. Repeated often. I only just met her. I only was making conversation. I didn't think I liked the way she acted. Actually I don't know if I liked her. I sort of might not have liked her. But then we had only talked a little. There were other people. I could not see her colors. This woman held her colors close. That is one perception. She held her colors inside. She put them away. They were not seeping out. Even a tiny bit. This woman had no colors. I met a woman who had no colors. Is there light. Is there white. A mass. No colors. I talked a little. We talked some. I stuck around. I felt myself showing off a little. In somewhat or not subtle ways. So she would see. Maybe she would see me. I pretended I did not see her. While I was showing off. Only a little. I did not think I liked her. I felt maybe I didn't like her. Why did I want her to see me. The other people. They talked to this woman. They talked to me. All of us left. Together we drove in a car. We went for a dance. I danced with all the women. I danced with her. We did not look. At each other. Except a little. We danced separately for each other. That is one perception. I danced for myself. Only. She danced for herself. Only too. I danced for all the women there. I danced for the joy of my body. I danced for the joy of my spirit. Only did I do this. I danced for her. I danced in spite of her. She danced. She danced. A little we looked. At each other. A little we smiled. At each other. I was aware of her presence at the table. We all sat. I heard her silence. I saw her talk. I was aware. Of her at the table. In the corner. She sat in the corner. Looking out. She looked out. In all directions. We did not talk. Only a little. I talked to the women at the table. I talked to the women not at the table. I knew this woman without colors was sitting at the table. Where were her colors. Seven days. I did not forget her. I did not forget the white. Was it white. Seven days. Other women asked me out. We will go out. We will eat together. We will eat together at someone's house. I wanted to ask the woman who I did not know if I liked a little. I said to the other women. Would it be all right. I want to ask this woman I said. Maybe she will want to come. Maybe they said. I am going to ask. I called. A voice answered. It did not sound like her. There was breath. Breath was what I heard. Perhaps no colors make this sound. I did not know if I liked this sound. I did not think I liked this sound. I spoke to her. I asked her. Yes she said. Yes she would. She would like to. Yes. She would. I would pick her up. I wondered. Why did I call her. Why would I call her. No colors. I could not say then she had no colors. I felt no colors. I could not say it. I drove to get her. I felt excited. In the car. I didn't know if I liked her. There were no colors. I walked to a door. Was this her door. The woman who looked out. Out from the corner. At the table. The woman who watched. The woman who was quiet. The voice said come in. I walked inside. Inside I paced. Nervously. I smiled. I didn't smile. I walked. I was being nice. I talked. I nervously talked. We talked. Seriously. My face was serious. Her face was serious. Her tone was serious. No colors. We left. What took you so long the other women wanted to know. We were going to leave without you. Nothing I replied. What had taken me so long. Our talking a little. We're here now. We all went in the same car. I drove the car. The woman I did not know if I liked a little sat in the front. The women in the back talked. I talked back to them. She talked a little back to them. I felt aware of her. We got to the house. It was one room. There was a woman there I did not like. They had started eating. We dished out food. I sat on the floor. The woman with no colors sat on the floor. Six feet away. I felt discomfort. One room. One woman I did not like. People talking. Everyone tries. Some take responsibility. I begin with comments. I make comments. I ask questions. What do you mean. How can that be. I disagree. I make comments on everything. I glance at the woman six feet away. A little. She does

not see me. She is looking at who's talking. I feel disappointed. I was talking. She talks. I watch her. She does not agree. I am glad. I appreciate she does not agree. I smile. She might see me. I talk. I say I do not agree. I say that is bullshit. She smiles. She might laugh a little. She looks at me. She appreciates me saying bullshit. I appreciate her. The woman who has the one room says I am impossible. Can't I lighten up. I am just trying to find some interest. I just want some interesting talk I say. In this one room. I'm not trying to be difficult I say. In one room. I wonder. To myself. Am I trying to be difficult. There is only one room. I was feeling nervous. I was bored. I wanted interest. I wanted to hear talk. To hear the woman talk. The woman six feet away. On the floor. I made comments. I disagree I said. I asked questions. I was being difficult they said. In this room. This one room. That was one perception. I ate food. I talked. I watched. The woman with no colors was serious. She was acting a little difficult. She was difficult. A little. I liked it. I smiled. We left. I pushed conversation in the back seat. I pushed. The woman with no colors sat quiet. She heard everything. But there were no colors. What could I do. I did not know. I needed to do something. There was nothing. I pushed conversation in the back. I would take her home. First. I would drop her first. I had to. What could I do. You can leave me here. She said this. The end of the drive. Just leave me here. All right. Here. Goodnight. Into the back. Goodnight. Goodnight into the front. She put her hand on my thigh. For one millisecond. A millisecond pressure. It shot through. It shot through my body. My whole body felt. My whole body felt the touch. Brief. A brief touch. That is one perception. The touch lasts forever. It lasts. It is lasting. It is here. Here. Here now. Here it is. Right here. Now. On my thigh. In my body. Within. Within me. Out. Out of me. It is lasting out. Out there. Out here. In air. Existing for itself. I can touch. I can touch it. I do. So. Where is it. Where does it exist. Where is it within. Where without. The woman with no colors. She is not here. She is walking. She walks to her house. She stands on her steps. She opens the door. She walks in. I drive. I drive away. Away from there. Away from the woman with no colors. Away. Away from the touch. From the hand. Why did she do that. What did it mean. Friendly. She was being friendly. Just friendly. I was anyone. I could have been anyone. I was anyone. It wasn't me. Not me. It didn't matter. It was someone. Just someone. Anyone. Why though. No colors. I drove with quiet. Outside. Stillness. Outside. Inside. No. No quiet. Questions. Feelings. Thoughts. Inside. Inside. Inside. Seven days. Seven days. We are going to a festival. Everyone. We all arrive. She arrived. We talk. She talks a little. She watches. There are many people. All talk. Talk. Talk. No silence. She leaves. I feel disappointed. We did not talk a little. A little maybe. Only. Only a little. She said I'm leaving. Before she left. In seven days. I'll be where you are. Where you work. In seven days. I am on business. I must go there. For business. I must meet people. For business. I will be there. Call me. Maybe. Maybe call me. Maybe I'll be there. I don't know. Maybe. Maybe we can do something. Get together. Maybe. Maybe get together. Maybe. I don't know. Maybe. We'll see. Maybe. We'll see what happens. What happens. Just wait. Wait a little. A little. So. See you. See you. She was gone. No colors. Nonchalance. With an edge. A little edge. Maybe. An edge. That is one perception. No nonchalance. Candor. No edge. Just edge. No. A little something. Candor. With nothing. Candor with something. With something. I couldn't say what. Something. I think. I think about it. For seven days. Will she call. Seven days. Who will she see. What is she doing. For seven days. What will we say. I thought. I thought about it. Seven days. The day came. After seven days. The day came. I was not there. I was somewhere. Not there. Not where she was. I was in another place. Afternoon came. I was not there. I called to say I would be late. No she's not here. She's not here. She tried calling. She tried. All day. Yes. All day. She couldn't reach you. She left. She may try tonight. On her way back. Still a chance. Still. A chance. I thought. Maybe. Still. I didn't move. Not then. Not yet. It was late. Still I stayed. Away. I was aware. Still. No movement. Not then. Not yet. No move. Still. Still I stayed. I talked. Still I talked. I got up. I decided. I left. It was late. I was late. On the highway. I stepped on it. I sped. I went fast. It was late. I walked in my door. It was late. I picked



Drawing by Alesia Kunz.





Drawing by Alesia Kunz.

up the phone. I called. Nothing. No one. She was not there. I put it down. I walked outside. The phone. I ran in. I ran in. Ran. Hello. Oh hi. Sure. C'mon over. I put the phone back. I put it down. She's coming. She's coming here. Now. Right now. Oh. What do I do. Do. What say. What will I say. I said. To myself. Out loud. I brought my stuff in. I brought it all in. I pushed things. Touched things. Looked. I walked. I walked. What do I do. The door. Hi. C'mon in. The woman with no colors. There they were. No colors. I felt them. No colors. So powerful no colors. So much right there. In the second. In space. Immediate. Right here to see. See. Nerves. I had a case. Nervous. Did she see. I talked. Trying to get a feeling. A feeling of her. Of her. Her. Who was she. She. I offered her things. To drink. To eat. Coffee. She wanted coffee. She sat one place. I sat one place. Different places. We faced. From different places. Talked. Talked. No colors. I looked. I looked at her. She talked. Seriously. She talked seriously. Her face was serious. I faced her. I talked. Seriously. I looked. I looked at her. She drank coffee. She talked. She looked. She looked at me. A little. We went out. To eat. We faced each other. Across the table. We talked. She talked. I talked. She laughed. I laughed. I smiled. We talked. We laughed. Seriously. We came home. We sat. Facing each other. We talked. We looked. We looked at each other. While we talked. We laughed. We talked. Nerves. Active. Nervous. I felt nervous. What do I do. What do I do now. She sat. Sat talking. Calm. She was calm. Contained. She was contained. No colors. I spun. Spinning. Circles. What do I do. What does she think. Is she. Thinking anything. About me. About the way I am. This situation. Who I am. No. No colors. I talk. I say nothing. She says nothing. I get up. I go to bed. I read. She turns her light out. I read. I turn my light out. I think. I think about her. I think about her. Out there. In the room. In the other room. In bed. I am in bed. I feel nervous. I lie in bed. I am stiff. I fall asleep. I dream. I dream of her. I dream of us. Both. We want to get together. Not a wanting. Not want. Something. We both wanted. To get together. It was understood. Silently. Agreed. Clear. Bright. Light. Very light. Easy. Very easy. No strain. No trying. A fact. The night lingered. I tossed. Part in sleep. Part in wake. Morning. I went through. To the bathroom. She slept. The woman with no colors. She lay. Sleeping. No movement. Only the head. I glanced. I looked. Quickly. I saw her head. A little. Would she wake. Would I leave. Before she waked. No. She must wake. I walked through. The bathroom. Closet. Kitchen. Bathroom. Closet. Kitchen. She moved. I hoped. No. Nothing. I was ready. To leave. To work. She moved. Hi. Slowly. She talked. Slowly. With sleep. I put on water. For coffee. I stayed. She got up. Made her coffee. We sat. I was ready. We faced each other. We talked. The clock ticked. I told her. My dream. Except one part. About wanting to get together. Everything else. I told. She dreamed. She told. Bones. Bones. No colors. The clock. Late. One hour. One hour late. I wanted to stay. I had to go. I had nothing to say. What could I say. I got up. I better go. So long. So long. So long. Seven days. Seven. Seven days. I thought. About her. About the evening. About. About. About. Tentative. I felt tentative. Wanting to move. To move. To move slowly. Slowly toward her. Toward her. Slowly. So slowly. To move. Moving. Moving toward her. Slowly. Slowly toward her. Feeling. Feeling the move. Feeling the movement. Feeling myself. Feeling. Feeling myself move. Feeling myself wanting to move. Feeling moving toward. Feeling moving toward. Feeling myself moving slowly. Moving slowly toward. Moving slowly toward her. Feeling myself. Moving slowly. Slowly. Slowly. Slowly feeling myself. Moving. Slowly. Slowly. Toward no colors. Toward no colors. Toward. Toward. Slowly toward. No colors. Moving slowly. Moving. Slowly. Feeling slowly moving. Feeling slowly moving. Feeling slowly moving. Toward no colors. No colors. Moving toward no colors.

Alesia Kunz's novel *Shangrila and Linda* is being published in May 1981. Her writing appears in *Artforum*, *Cloven Hoof*, *Criss-Cross*, *Joyous Struggle*, *Quest: A Feminist Journal*, *Working from Silence*.

# LUST IS JUST A FOUR-LETTER WORD

J. LEE LEHMAN

*Years ago, a couple of weeks after I decided to append the word "lesbian" to my identity, I met a lesbian from another town in Wisconsin who asked if I'd like to spend a weekend with her. I jumped at the chance: lesbians in Green Bay were (are?) very secretive and I hadn't found any yet. When I showed up the following Friday, one of her first comments was, "I hope you didn't get the idea that we were going to sleep together." That was my first case of unrequited lust.*

Perhaps since I never read anything in the "teenage romance" genre, I managed to escape the goal of love and marriage as an adult. Coming out in Wisconsin, my first experience of other lesbian lifestyles was the obsessive desire not to let anyone know. Having also seemingly escaped much of the programming about how bad it was to be homosexual, my first glimpse of the closeted mentality was from the outside. Ever since, I have been fascinated with watching lesbians who structure their lives so that the only difference between them and their neighbors is their choice of partner. Does not lesbianism itself make one an outlaw? While one may perhaps argue the validity of this premise politically, it appears that many lesbians live highly successful lives (by their own assessment) by making that one change in sexual preference, and then closing the door on further tampering with society's expectations. In fact, all of us stop tampering at some point: it is impossible to exist solely in a vortex. It appears, however, that most lesbian-feminists have preferred not to admit that they have, indeed, stopped short of confronting sexual change.

Every lesbian knows that it is her sexual preference that makes her "different." However, our male-dominated society makes it difficult to sort out what sexuality is. Specifically, we are ill-equipped to deal with the *process* of being sexual: we lack the behavior patterns.

*I met her at the bar. She swaggered in and ordered a beer. I motioned that she was welcome to join me at my table. We introduced ourselves, giving name and job. We eyed each other—watching the movements, the fingering of the beer bottles, the jerked drinking. After the appropriate discussion of local geography, I asked her if she was free later that night. She said, no, she had to get to work early the next morning; how about the following night. She drove me home to see where I lived. She showed up promptly the next*

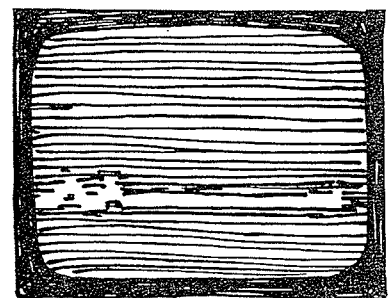
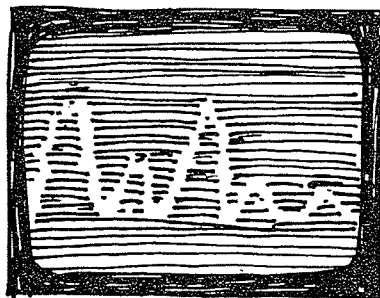
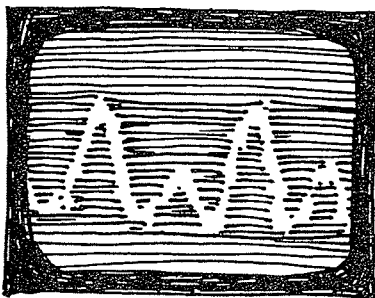
*night. We had a beer each before going to bed. We made love. The next morning, she said, "This is never going to work; we're both butch." I punched her in the mouth. I'm not sure whether I did it because of her knee-jerk conception of butch/femme or because I was furious that she thought that it had to turn into a relationship.*

What sexual behavior are we programmed to display? In earlier stages of the feminist movement, it was important to emphasize the physiological process of orgasm. The focus was that women had been programmed not to expect orgasms, not to expect pleasure from sexual relationships. While it was eminently clear that Woman's energy had been diverted into the quest for Love, there have been few challenges to the primacy of Love in relating to other people.

What is Love? I am speaking here of the romantic investiture of the loved one with mythological power. Prince Charming was supposed to sweep us off our feet. Now Princess Charming may do the same. In either case, the process is one of objectifying one's lover into a projection of pieces of oneself. Because we have projected ourselves onto the lover, the lover then becomes necessary for self-esteem. This is exactly the sequence patriarchal society expects of its participants: women project their strength onto their men; men project their emotions onto their women. From the woman's perspective, it is only possible to feel powerful through one's partner. Furthermore, since women's sexuality had to be controlled (for patrilineal purposes), the easy solution was to use the sex = love equation.

*She stood at the edge of the party's conversation group. Her face, while impassive, was notable because of the spark in her eyes as she watched the other women. I was awed by the fireworks display. A voice inside said, "Get to know her; she will be very important in your life." But is this lust or is this love?*

Lesbians are being trapped by the same myth which created many a desperate housewife. The myth is apparent in our literature. While Isabel Miller's (Alma Routsong's) *Patience and Sarah* had the laudable mission of showing a positive lesbian relationship in which neither of the partners went mad or died prematurely, it read like a Candy Striper romance. Sally Gearhart, in *The Wanderground*, showed



love transcending racial and age boundaries; she still did not get beyond making her characters love objects.

The placing of women on pedestals—even if covered by labyris and women's symbols—is not an especially healthy process. All the romance in the world cannot hide the fact that good sex is an intense form of communication. The power of sexuality—recognized for centuries by occultists—is overwhelming to some. Furthermore, the words and concepts kicking around for “orgasms”—surrender, little death, etc.—convey a power which has been essentially ignored in most feminist discussions. Rather than confront the reality of this power, many have opted for the traditional (meaning imposed) women's solution: it's all right if it's with someone you love. There is an implicit assumption that as long as trust and caring are present, then everything's okay. While sex with a loved one may be desirable, it is not necessary.

*The lesbian community around Rutgers University in the early seventies was of the mind that every woman should meet Princess Charming and settle down. Unfortunately, it was too obvious that most were hopping from one Princess to the next, with barely a week in between. Furthermore, it was very difficult for me to appear in the guise of someone else's Princess when my most rhapsodic speeches were devoted to the algae I was studying in grad school, called “pond scum” by my more sympathetic friends. Semesters were turning into years and I was turning into a horned toad. I decided to try New York City. Ah, to live only a few blocks from the watering holes! But there was a new problem. While the word “nonmonogamy” had crept into the lesbian vocabulary by then, one was still not supposed to objectify one's sisters. As a political junkie, my lifestyle got raised eyebrows at best—especially when I insisted on using words like “trick” at lesbian-feminist meetings.*

It is important to realize that projection onto the loved one is objectification. The love *object*—the solution to one's needs—blinds us to the possibility of relating to the lover as she really is. The objectification of True Love is no less tyrannical than the classic “male” objectification of Woman as Tits-n-Ass. However, since it is always easier to see others' problems, we as feminists become obsessed with Tits-n-Ass objectification by men, without seeing our own objectification patterns. This selective vision results in putting down women who engage in, or seem to engage in, physical objectification of other women, while ignoring the more pervasive emotional objectification of other women.

Why is it that no one objects if one chooses to limit a relationship with another woman to one specific area—as long as that one area isn't sex? Why is it all right to do nothing but go bowling with another woman, but not all right just to have sex with her? I would submit that the view that sex is so different from other activities is a hang-over from patriarchal society. Is one activity really more objectifying than the other? Or in both cases is it simply the recognition that the

activity is something that both enjoy sharing with the other?

A portion of the romantic myth is based on the idea that there is one person for each of us who complements us perfectly. Hence, the admission that it is possible to live a very satisfactory life by partitioning one's emotional and sexual life among a number of people can be very frightening. While most lesbians would admit that it is okay, possibly desirable, to partition one's emotional life between a number of friends, it is harder for many to accept the corollary that one can do the same with one's sex life. This attitude makes it difficult for the woman to find any positive value in exploring new ways of expressing her sexuality, or in finding new issues to express *through* her sexuality. This, I believe, is the reason that some lesbian-feminists have trashed or censored other lesbians who have tried to address lesbian sexuality in new ways. I remember in particular the scathing personal attack in *Big Mama Rag* on Tee Corinne's talk/slide show “Lesbian Sexual Images in the Fine Arts” in the summer of 1979. Witness more recently the vehement (or should I say violent) reaction to the open discussion of lesbian S/M. Could it be that some lesbians are afraid to really confront the taboo of woman enjoying—and defining—sex?

The ultimate question, I believe, lies in what one wants to get out of sex. If one views sex as only a means of expressing love, then loveless sex is meaningless. However, this is not the only view possible. To me, sex is an expression of an affinity with another person, and that affinity can exist on only one or on many levels.

*I was furious with her for what she was saying at the Coalition meeting. Half-baked political statements, dropped with a sprinkling of “and (\*\*STAR\*\*) says...” We went out drinking afterwards and argued for another few hours. We closed the bar, and went to my apartment to continue talking. Soon we were kissing instead, embracing, then pulling each other's clothes off. Is this lust or is this love? Do I care?!!!*

Change is a stressful process. Sex is one field of experience in which *all* feminists *must* change, because there has been such neglect of our sexuality in the past. It is important that we be open to new models of behavior, and not be too quick to dismiss what at first may not seem to fit our political expectations.

And this brings us back to lust. Lust as an expression of sexual desire can represent an affirmation of our collective right to unfettered, unguilty, undefined sexuality. It is an appreciation of another's—and one's own—sexual dynamism. Lust is an assertive statement of the positive virtues of sexual exploration. Can we be truly said to have explored the limits of lesbian sexuality when all we have done is to substitute Love-and-Living-Together for Love-and-Marriage?

J. Lee Lehman is an astrologer and computer freak. Her latest projects are computer-calculated astrological positions of asteroids, including Sappho, Lilitha, and Pandora.

## Lovenotes II and IV

You drew your foot up and down my leg  
Underneath the bridge table  
And I forgot my opening bid,  
Wondering what you could do  
With the rest of your body.

I wish that you would wallow  
In my body, like a little buffalo.

Janet Ruth Heller

Janet Ruth Heller, Coordinator of the Writing Tutor Program at the University of Chicago, is a co-editor of *Primavera*, a women's literary magazine.

# Making Art

Objects come to me. They float mid-air. They move alone or in groups. Flight patterns glide in and around me. From these images I make my sculpture.

One day, nine years ago, while cooking dinner, I had a walloping orgasm. I felt astounded; it was so unexpected. The circumstances certainly did not warrant a sexual response. Pleased but confused I put the experience out of my mind.

A few days passed. I felt strange. I felt an urgent need to paint cookies. As an artist, I could somewhat reasonably allow myself to do this. I was skeptical, but the mystery was more compelling. I painted cookies for several weeks. The choice was easy: they had to be gingersnaps. Peek Frean's gingercrisps were the right size, texture, and snappy taste. My perfect cookie. I shopped several stores each day. I was afraid someone would catch me. I went wherever my food stamps would take me. In my home I left piles of them around all the rooms.

I began to see the cookies pushing out of a wall of molten fudge. sensuous mounds of thick heavy fudge. What was I to do? Working intuitively, accepting the cookies, reaffirmed me as never before. Painting them gave me pleasure. I felt calm at work, with long attention spans. When I stopped, I felt satisfied and happy. My body told me so. I was tapping my own deep reserves. My life already felt changed. So I waited, content to paint cookies and think about fudge.

One day I whipped up Ivory Snow Flakes. The soap peaked and made luscious mounds. They stood firm with taut edges. Quickly I put the suds on a board and slipped the cookies in. They held there balanced in the soap. It was beautiful, but it just wasn't right. It was okay, but I felt disturbed. I wanted something more, something with more body. Something I could really move and get into. . . plaster! Yes. Yes! I had some. I got a pot, a bucket, water and set to mix. Oh, I could feel it slipping over my hands, circling around my fingers. It thickened and grew heavier, clinging to my fist. I waited for the right touch before pouring. My stars, my floors! I was unprepared. I had to get some plastic, a box, towels, clean water. I ran around grabbing things, rushing to get back to my work site. I was afraid the plaster might harden. Not a moment too soon. Pour. The bucket was heavy to lift. I worried the whole thing might fall apart. I took a deep breath, exhaling, letting the plaster go. It fell well. I thought I sang, but I had no time to think. I picked up a bunch of cookies. One by one I pushed them into the plaster. Green, push scoop. Grey, push scoop. Lavender, push scoop, push scoop. The plaster got harder. Plunge twist, twist, till no more would go with discretion.

Dazed, I stared at what I made. My body flashed heat. The sculpture there, its sight in my mind imprints overlays, registered and connected. It was the image that sparked the orgasm. The thought of those beautiful circles slipping in



and out of their matrix. . . I came upon the creation of my pleasuring and joy. The kitchen happening was brought back again by making the sculpture.

I was eager to understand how and what I was thinking. It seemed to secure a transformative power intrinsically connected to my coming out. That process of our sexual revolution that individualizes and stands us apart. I had always known I loved women, but coming to terms with myself, the culture and countercultures around me, took time and patience. The give and take of the sculpture showed me a way. Visualizing the cookies in my mind, making the choice of materials, and placing each cookie into the plaster were activities beyond the psychic and cultural censorship that normally tempered my thinking. I came into contact with my own desires.

Within this state of eroticism lay an incredible strength. I realized I was the only person responsible for my sexual excitement. Further, it gave me an experience of independence. It was a powerful vision. I stood alone and it scared me. My images came back terrifying and bloody, threatened by my independence; I was ready to call myself back. Instead of being overwhelmed by anxiety and fear, I held to the confidence gained by the cookies experience. I found myself free to voice my confidence and pleasure as well as fear and terror. I made plaster cakes that consisted of shards of mirror, little animals, broken, being engulfed by plaster, sliding to oblivion; or another cake with garishly painted animal cracker cookies surrounding, taunting, one screaming red-mouthed bear at the center.

By placing myself and intimate glimpses of my imagination into my work, the body of sculpture I made gave me the opportunity to speak out, accept as my own, make art for and from all the voices within me. Face to face with the body of work I could give them their due. With practice I could connect concrete events and feelings that keyed off the images. Knowing this I could separate and demystify them. Recognizing, accepting, speaking, or making art about

# Making Love

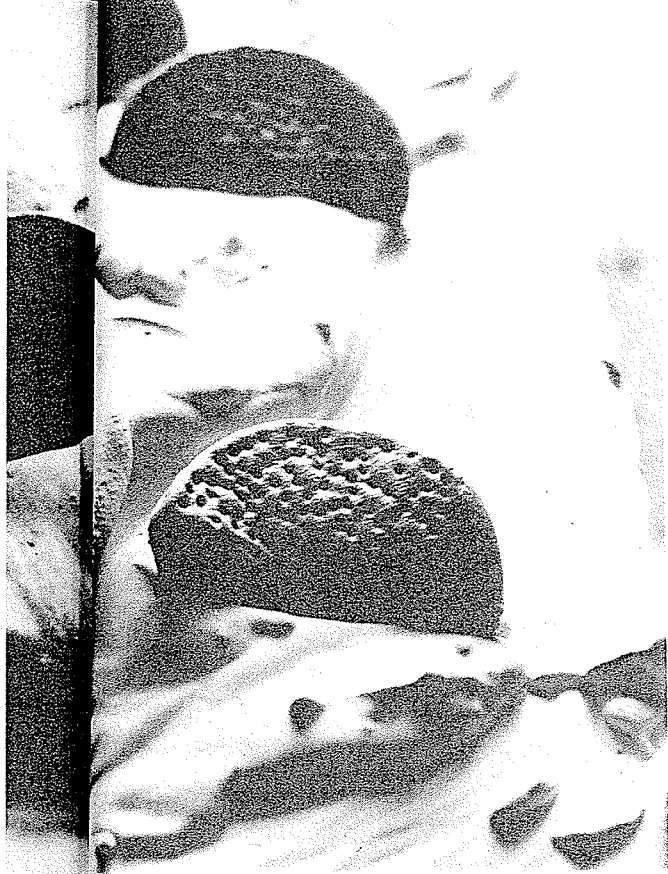
Sandra De Sando

We have been lovers for about four or five months; we share the same loft. It's difficult for me to share the space. It's hard to keep my mind on drawing when there are other sounds and movements. I turn and watch her working or walking getting supplies. My work time wears down; I look at her more and more. Sometimes it is her face. I remember seeing it tensed or relaxed as we talked and made decisions together. Many times it is her behind and inseam. It's those damned Levi's. I know why she likes them. They fit her so well. Low on her hips, that fold of material at the cross of her thighs.

I give up trying to work. I keep thinking about her T-shirt, how it falls loose off her nipples. Or how her back muscles tense and swell as she rolls up ink at the workshop. I walk by her a couple of times to get a closer look. Wrist, elbow, ear, brown spot beauty mark. Ink on her cheek. I stroke her stomach, but she wants to work. It isn't until much later, an Ironsides, MASH, Jokers Wild and Bowling for Dollars later, that we both get a little buzzy.

She is standing at her drawing desk. She smiles. She walks over and cups her body with mine. I hold her for awhile; she turns and begins kissing my neck, face, mouth. We kiss until my knees drop me to the studio floor. I search for the nub of her jeans. I smell for it, grabbing it with my teeth. The denim is harsh, the zippers cold metal in my mouth. I adjust my grip and pull her with my teeth; dragging her growling and laughing, sliding her over the floor. Her legs lock over my back. She tries smothering my face with my shirt. My saliva soaks through her jeans. I won't give up my hold, she hers. Laughing, we move to the bed without letting go. We undress each other as we stumble up the ladder, fighting to get there first. Stubbing toes, bumping knees in the rush.

Once there we slow. Wrapped under covers we caress. Warm exchanges pass through us. My hands, my tongue, reach out to her breast and inner hip. To her back and shoulder blades, to the nape of her neck, to her clavicle, back down to her nipple. Sometimes she sucks and bites on my breast. We take our time. Her hands kneading me. Rubbing me. Me needing deep muscle relaxation. Her touch excites me. My touch excites me. My vulva grows fat; my vagina gradually loosens. Slowly the concentration builds a series of shimmers within me; happy, my cunt shakes them out in small concentric bands. Each section I open, wet a little more, a little wider, a little deeper. Hotter. My clitoris urges me on to more movement. I find myself biting her ass, sucking in each cheek, gliding my spit into her asshole. She turns and my teeth rub her hip. Up and down, up and down, sliding to her belly, nose first to the button, my chin bristling on her hair. I listen to myself breathing. Going layers down. Then a snap; tension gone. A breakthrough. One of many. Access and suspense in inner body reasoning. I look forward



Sandra De Sando. *Cookies an' Milk* (1971). Painted cookies and plaster. 16" x 24"

the things that concerned me led me to understand a personal limit to my terror in both inward and outward acts of violence. The primacy of their existence relied on the fact of created and sustained dependence, possession bound by a net of forgetfulness and a promise of power. It required I silence my own needs, be unresponsive, deadened to my own injury and anger. It consistently fed an undercurrent of failure that twisted my ideas of pleasuring, combining them with hatred. Until now. I saw myself in place, unguarded, my memory acute. Resolved: to make myself responsive and responsible. Situations of power and powerlessness became nudged with the recognition of change.

Alternatives and choices came over a longer period of time. The cookies model held within its context the idea and action of self-reliance. It was based on the constant utilization of my own resources. It gave a growing sense of security that was not easily undermined. The images were my immediate response to a given situation. I was learning to respect their value. From them I made art that was clearly my own. It was a willing tapping and response of my reasoning abilities. This touching, testing, and reassuring allowed me to place myself closer and closer to intimate spaces, deeply personal places with unique perspectives. Places where I could stand supported by my own effort and come away with a sense of dignity, grace, and power. It took conscious, imagined, and practiced effort.

As the image and art-making phase of my life grew I began to take notice of this peculiar awareness during love-making. I would remember small patches. It was like waking up from a dream thinking how clear and important it was, but immediately being unable to remember the dream or what it meant. Cookies and milk flew out from an incredible core source. It seemed ultimately important to see my sex, my sensual and loving senses within the same state of eroticism. I was eager to make love to women who shared this same sense of personal power and autonomy.

to our slow nudges. Waiting for our bodies to signal movement. We lie rocking, rocking gently, rolling down the tremors. Cradling our heat, feeding our openings until our bodies are jelly, reluctant to hold tension. New life floods the back of my head, rattles and rolls my heart alive. Winding through my ovaries it flips the switches of my clit in time with the grab and release of my vaginal walls.

I rest. She begins again. We perform meditation rituals; we work together; thrust, rub, return, circle. We shimmer bone to bone and wait for the right of passage, a thoracic ball of light suspended between us. Moving together we form figure eights, crossing X marking the spot. We spark and court a toss of the hip; a sigh and a shoulder fall through to the heart. Valentine fingers sneak through a passageway. We meet at lips. Twist, tie, lock tongues together alligator rough. Come again.

There is a feeling of remembrance. A feeling of boundary and threshold. I know something is within my reach.

Carol asks if I am ready to buzz. She places the vibrator between us. In a second we begin. I turn it on low. The vibrations make us giggle. A goofy sort of feeling, almost too strong too soon. It feels like it will open our bellies. We keep losing our breath until we channel the flow. Then sighs, breaths, sighs. Slowly sliding to the right, no, too quick. Nudging gently to the center, no not there. Over slowly to the left. A spark, yes, but oh, too strong; it's gone.

Moving our hips in lighter motions, we look for that spark, that tension, that pinch of response. In an all-around body wrap we fit snug, thighs, feet, stomachs, breasts, face to face. Seeking pleasure in the unity of motion. My muscles stutter as the passage widens. We work each shudder, smoothing it from a lump, a bump, to a lengthening wave. Reuniting the thread of cell to cell relay. Smiling, I feel my body respond to my lover's changes. Intrigued by our body commands, we grasp, suspend, release, spiral, let go. Waves of heat lift my hair. From my middle light and space. A Fallopian twist and twinge skirt my interior. Colors encourage me. Pictures seduce me. Then they are gone. I relax, breathe again. Images roll. Music. Dancing shoes rocking, revolving. Fish sing winking their eyes and turn into houses and rooms. Ecstasy. Hats high-step with pearls and opals. Parades of buttons wearing Minnie Mouse gloves and shoes sing just a few words. I keep repeating it; then it is over. I want more. There's a place I've been. I know it. Knowing it, I have to go on.

I move off her body. I massage her and stretch her legs, rubbing sweat off her stomach. I spread her tangled hair, my fingers monitor the channel. That touch, her wet and open, loosens a knot in my wrist that snaps to my elbow, whizzes through my shoulder, and wakes a space behind my right ear... my eye startled. My mouth ooohs. I watch her as I slip the dildo in, small nuzzles at first. She arches, lifts. "Take it out a little." "Okay, how about here." "Yes, better,

good. What about you?" "Yes, soon." I know I have to be careful. She and I work swiftly. I am so wet I lose my grip, stabilize, and suddenly it's in me too. A voluptuous body response. I almost let go. We waver, not quite ready for movement. We wait for the intensity to subside. We kiss again, deep in behind rough edges on teeth into soft gums. Mouths open sucking tongues out their length. Their roughness tempered by spit, their underneath slick as they turn against each other. Carol swings her head. I grip an earlobe, humming in her ear. She counters, squish wriggling her tongue a total sound in my ear. Goose bumps haze me. My heart takes leave of me. I feel its hot place in my chest. I am suspended in the wait of its return. A few moments pass, it's back. Its journey now a message in my own body language. Speaks passing on a beat report beat. Her body lifts to mine. I pass the movement back. I grip her throat in my teeth. Gently drawing my mouth closed as I lift off, letting go as I leave her, trailing off, feeling my teeth dry against her skin. Lost until the first wave hits me hard. Wrenched, warped until it eases its spell. It too spreads its story. Its language I barely understand, but care, desire to follow.

I curl my legs around, spread wide on top of her. Remembering ribbon or colored nylon rappelling line. Thinking of it as part of my vagina, circling through, right near the edge. Tugging it, loosening it, widening it, tugging it, closed again. Feeling the strength of its connection to my clitoral pulse. That hard bead, that one point taking shape, spreading pleasure, filling every nook and cranny my mind and body can create. We work hard. Muscles gather tightened, my breath far from slow delirium. Crunching, bone jerking movement, patterned, patterned over and over again. Tensed to slow motion, trying to hear. Voices I have waited for so long in silence... I am here. Yes, I am here, I am ready. I am here. It is time. My body snaps, stiffens, convulses, screams yodeling yes. Voices come alive. Godmothers gossips all. I spin. It is wonderful. Yahooin, hootin. My body shakes with pleasure. Orbiting. Laughing, feeling my strength. The centrifugal pull, hair flowing, lungs screaming, legs moving running streaming whirling. All of me joined together, reaching a place so clean it has a rich moist growing smell.

Slowed, my heart beat wavers, my breath rasps to sighs, my blood simmers and levels. I stand alone, curious. I settle to the ground. Thinking of the dimensions of this place. I walk for a while. I wander through the city exhilarated by its beauty. Soothed and open I feel a familiar peace. The orgasm wanes. I find a mound I like. It is covered with deep grass. I lie down comfortable on its springiness. It smells of rich earth. I think: things grow well here.

Sandra De Sando is a portrait artist, sculptor, and Associate Director of Hibbs Gallery, NYC. She enjoys meeting other women and making love. No taboos, no guilt, just women loving women.

# Confessions of a Quiltist

Radka Donnell

It took me almost forty years of attempts at erotic fulfillment to find out that my sexuality remained at a stage short of the kind considered normal or genital. My whole body remained open and waiting like a wound; my genital parts were only two folds among many, rather like a fabric unrolling to welcome those whom I loved. I uncovered what made my sexuality what it is as I looked back at the story of my love of fabrics and as I looked at my quilts.

When I was a child, in the early thirties in Bulgaria, there were no ready-made clothes. Every year, in early spring, a seamstress came to our house to do the sewing for everyone but my father (he had his tailor in the center of town).

I both loved and hated the times the seamstress was there. The children's room was turned into her workroom. The decisions about the colors and styles were made by my mother and sister; and I was allowed to have my say only about the collar's shape and other small details that did not matter. At the fittings my mother stood closer to me than usual and touched me, or rather, handled the material next to my skin in a sure way as if in touching there were no problems ever. She came out of her usual remote and distracted air, and half-peevisly, half-humbly submitted to the final judgments of the seamstress.

The seamstress was very quiet, dressed in black, completely in charge of herself and the situation. She was a middle-aged widow, and this called for silence on everybody's part, and made her work something to be respected on account of death.

She stayed a week or two working incessantly. She did not come downstairs to eat with us but ate off a plate on top of the sewing machine. She never looked up at anyone or at anything except her work, and she left, half-defiant, half-forlorn, when she was done. In the room there remained

a faint odor of her sitting there and of ironed and singed clothes.

All this seemed close to a miracle to me, and she, a kind of higher being. She cut the expensive materials without hesitating, never spoiling or wasting anything. She made the patterns herself just by looking at the French magazines my mother held before her with an unsteady hand, and everything fit perfectly. As for my mother, she could sew in straight lines: she mended torn sheets and made pillow cases and diapers, but nothing free or in the round.

No electric appliances existed at the time except the radio, and the sewing machine was kept turning by hand.



It made a sound like a miniature train going places. I imagine that this was the first machine sound to reach me in the womb, while my mother made diapers as she was waiting for me, just as she later did for my brother. The sewing machine's motions and its sound I imitated in the bathtub, cutting the water into ribbons that rejoined by themselves. I dotted seams with my fingers across the surface and felt the tub water like a fluid skirt which rippled round me but did not constrict me. My mother rinsed me afterwards with water that was regularly too hot. I

had attacks of fear that my body would be rinsed away as the water rolled off and down the drain.

Bathing took place in the evening, ostensibly to keep the dirt from getting into the clean bed. But I suspect now it was mainly a substitute for the body contact my mother withheld from me for lack of time, lack of interest, and for fear it would spoil me. As usual in our rude country at that time, she kept nudity in front of children down to a minimum. Whether for reasons of class, or because of her own physical fatigue or inhibitions, she systematically unclasped my hands when I put them round her neck and lowered them with a sweep loud enough to hear. To give, to make a home for my feelings, any material was good enough but the flesh. Thus the feel of my clothes against my body, the scrutiny of others' clothes for the bodies beneath them and the contact they promised or forbade, occupied my whole childhood.

For reasons I shall never understand, I was allowed to accompany my father to the tailor's. There I was expected to be silent, and I watched all the more avidly, more solemnly than in church, one man fit another man into new clothes. The tailor was in shirt-sleeves; the tape measure framed his neck and bobbed like a necklace as he moved about. As many others in his trade he had a lame leg, but he hobbled, kneeled down and hopped up briskly as he adjusted the jackets and pants being fitted. His face shone with something I later recognized as love, and it ruled his hands in the form of respect and skill, slowing down or speeding up his fingers to straighten here, to smooth down there, to pin the material next to my father's body. Materials in salt-and-pepper, in her-ring-bone design, in tiny English checks, pin-stripes in dark colors were swirled off the wooden rolls and thrown over the shoulders of my father for him to look at in the daylight and before

the mirror for as long as he would have it. My father, who generally was on the run, there took his time, a long time, and spoke to the tailor as an equal, as one professional to another, both smiling and gesticulating a lot.

All our clothes were cared for by our maid — washed by hand in the cellar and ironed in her room (which was next to my parents' bedroom and with only a locked door between). She got up very early and fell asleep before they did, otherwise she must have heard all. My parents went out a lot in the evening, or else they talked late into the night, and this astonished me as my mother otherwise talked very little. How the maid figured out what to do, with minimum instruction, is a mystery to me. She ironed a whole day every week, using an iron that was kept hot by coals. She kept her back turned to me as I sat watching on her bed, and when I held on to her as I had seen her boyfriends do, she shook me off by the force of her legs and did not stop ironing.

She ironed her things last, and kept her best blouse out on a hanger till her day off. When she took me along on her dates I saw her clothes getting crumpled and parts of her blouse hanging loosely out in front. The back of her friend as he hugged her blocked my view from where I was playing. Before going home, she pulled her clothes back into place, pressing her hands over them, again and again, squeezing herself in place, too, straightening everything, smoothing her stockings which had turned around.

Back at home and in bed, my bedcovers fell as a curtain between what I had seen outside and myself; they kept

in the warmth that rose in waves inside me. The children's covers were flat, lightly stuffed, and quilted in squares by craftsmen who also quilted mattresses and more elaborate comforters for adults, which were a bit puffier and had running designs with floral curlicues. All the comforters I have seen in our country were done in apricot and rose shades of damask or glazed cotton material and were called, and still are called, yurgans. They had enough body and thickness to be piled and plied so as to give the illusion there was someone under the covers even when there was no one underneath. Thus they were part of many games of hide-and-seek and acts of disappearance.

The yurgans of my parents were covered with a fine-meshed crocheted net to keep off the dust. On top of the children's beds there were thin blankets. Since they were difficult to clean, the yurgans were never to be stepped on or sat on directly. Yet, even though it was forbidden, we sat on the beds and jumped up and down till exhausted. Once it gave me a terrible pain to be pressed down on top of a yurgan to be fondled. I thought of the yurgan all the time and could not stop trying to puff it up again afterwards, even though it was not even ours.

Unless I was late for a meal nobody at home missed me actively except the maid, but I never spoke much to her. I did cry when she left to be married. She cried only once when my father embraced her after the wedding. She was getting married to a butcher from out-of-town after having taken care of my father's clothes for more than ten years, after his fine pyjamas, shorts, shirts, and handkerchiefs had passed through her hands every week and come out immaculately clean. It was clear to me that she was saying farewell to being close to him, closer than his children ever would be.

How close my parents were to each other I could not tell. I seldom saw them together except at meals and did not understand what was exchanged. But I could watch my mother making up her face. She first used a lot of powder and lipstick and then patted them off, and plucked her eyebrows lightly. I watched the side mirrors, which multiplied her face and peopled the alcove in which her dressing table stood with so many images of her that I got dizzy. It seemed to me that I was being enveloped, stuck in the tight space created by the play of mirrors round my moth-

er, as I sometimes got stuck in my clothes while dressing, not knowing which way to push through my head or my arms.

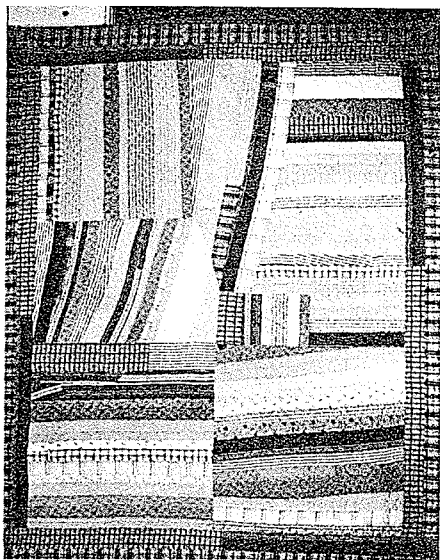
As my mother pulled and closed drawers, unpacked packages, shopped, groomed herself and us, managed things in the kitchen, her eyes were always elsewhere than her hands. Her hands looked out of place and never rested in a hold, but fluttered on, in and out of bags, shopping nets, gloves, baskets, pots and pans. Even though she did not cook day by day, but only helped make the preserves and pickle vegetables for the winter, she never stood still. I saw her rest only when she watched the icon of the Virgin Mother, the mother in the icon holding her baby boy sadly, sweetly, eternally, in a restful hold — something my mother denied herself and me.

My father sometimes allowed me to walk a couple of blocks along his side; and he did have a free hand to hold mine. That was the only part of him I remember being allowed to touch. Inside his hand was gentle and warm and his fingers were well padded and soft. I remember wishing to touch my father's hair, which was curly and unruly, as I wanted mine to be. His seemed to have a life of its own, from the way he tried to hold it in place as he talked on and shook it briskly. The horsehair that regularly stuck out from the mattresses had the same sheen and spring.

My hair was the only part of me my mother touched with comfort. She seemed to have trouble getting it combed and spent extra time pinning ribbons in it, which always slipped off. I rolled and unrolled the ribbons until they would roll back into a curl. My hair was straight and cut short, as my mother considered plaited hair common.

Even before I could read I had learned how to knit, but my mother hated hand-knit clothes. She preferred fine, machine-knit English cardigans, and screened my friends on the basis of their woolens. I think she was afraid of pubic hair, and this rather than class prejudice was the reason she banned knitted woolens, except socks and mittens.

The only person who had a body for me was my grandmother on my mother's side. She did all sorts of manual tricks for me; she knotted handkerchiefs into mice that jumped and rabbits that wagged their ears; she laid cards, taught me to play patience and



Radka Donnell. *Bridging* (1975). 83" x 102"



how to knit before learning to read. She let me fold and unfold her linens and polish the leaves of her rubber plants. She fell asleep in my presence and snored something like little tunes. She put her arms around me.

She also talked to "her dead," as she called them. Every Saturday afternoon she took me along to the graveyard, and there tidied the graves of her husband and three of her seven children who had died in early adulthood. She weeded, changed the flowers, worked the earth. Sitting by the graves, she talked in a normal tone of voice, addressing them by name. Holding my hand she told me their lives and imagined how they would be living now, as if they had not gone but moved to another country. Around us other people were visiting with "their dead."

Sometimes my grandmother untied her hair and then tied it again, dropping a hairpin or two, which I found instantly. She acted everywhere as if at home, and freed me from the constraints of home and special places, though her own movements were circumscribed. She had no dressing table, but kept her things on top of a dresser,

arranged as on an altar. In the next corner there was an icon and around it the photos of her favorite son, his decorations, and poems he had translated. All the corners were furnished with symbolic objects. She and her maid, like all women I watched, kept moving between these special places—corners, niches, alcoves, dressers, drawers, tables, stoves, with shopping trips in between. Their farthest trips were to the park, and there I dug in the sand, made mud pies and built sand castles.

When I was young I did a lot of hiding, covering up, and melting into covers. Not yet ten, I often drew the covers tight around me, letting my eyes rove between waking and sleep, watching the regular patterns round out or draw together over my body rising and falling like the landscape of the day behind me, the order of the seams running into disorder, always new, always different, and taking on the shapes of dreams. Crawling out of them in the morning I left them lying there, like the snake skins I ran across in summer in the woods near our house.

Many years after, as I made the beds of my young daughters, I medita-

tively received their life from the disarray they left—the unmade beds welling up with shapes and feelings, and the covers finally settling as a float on uncertain currents. Starting to make quilts was partly a reaction to my children's physically growing out of my life and partly a meditation on all the other issues I had neglected. The cloth stands for personal definition and distance, boundaries and contact. The quilts, in the end, consciously became a speculum through which I finally came to love myself and accept my sexuality, my need for warmth and protective embraces coming first and foremost. In the initial fragmentation of the pieces of cloth, I also encountered my anger, which always precedes my surrender to others. The interactive quality of cloth as a visual, sensual, and social given became the bridge for me to receive what I had missed as a child.

"Confessions of a Quiltist" is excerpted from *Lines and Works: Talks with Women Artists* by Lynn F. Miller and Sally Swenson (to be published by Scarecrow Press in 1981).

Active as an art therapist, collagist, and draughtsperson, Radka Donnell has pieced more than 250 quilts since 1966.

## Counterpoint

Leslie Simon

it is often referred to as the itch. the urge. getting your full satisfaction out of life. out of honey. the sweet wet dripping down between legs. after Satisfied. after Sanctified. After the rain, no one complains. just lie there, letting blood-filled organs, tissues, brains re-do their molecular needs. cellular renaissance. voodoo dust. like magic/ is born/ a miracle. two bodies gave birth and fed. this is cock to cunt to cunt to cock counterpoint. this is a blessing. O Lord. O Lord. to bed.

OHMS resistance/ OHMS  
OHMS resistance/ OHMS

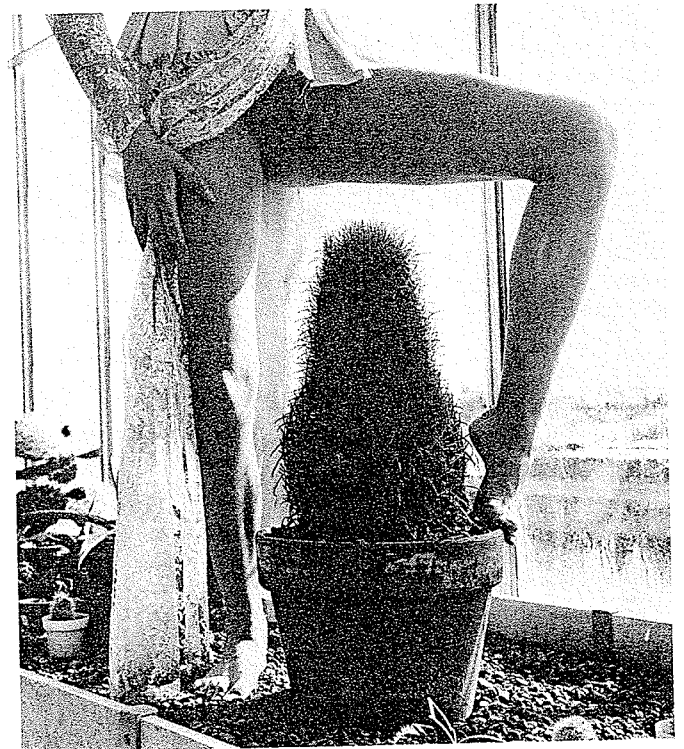
vol-TAGE/vol-TAGE/vol-TAGE (Chant twice)

energy eLECtric  
energy eLECtric

the sparkle of your spine on my brow  
the heaven of your scent in my mouth  
the pleasure of your breath at my teeth  
the languor of your leg on my head  
the presence of our love in my womb  
has Burst upon my sheet  
O Lord. O Lord.  
to bed.

Leslie Simon teaches Women's Studies at City College of San Francisco. "Counterpoint" will appear in a book of poems, *I rize/Uriz/We Born*.

© 1981 Leslie Simon



Linda Troeller. *Leg over Cactus*. Linda Troeller is a teacher, photographer, and performance artist.

# Narcissism, Feminism, and Video Art

## Some Solutions to a Problem in Representation

Micki McGee

Feminist art has often received the disparaging label "narcissistic" from audiences unaccustomed to seeing female subjectivity in the arts. And video has been described as an inherently narcissistic medium.<sup>1</sup> So when a feminist artist works in video, it would seem she increases her chances of producing work which will be read as narcissistic. But a narcissistic representation, whether it results from audience predisposition or is produced in the technology of the medium, is incompatible with a feminist aesthetic.\*

Early feminist art, particularly as it developed on the West Coast, began with a consideration of women's personal experience.<sup>3</sup> Work took the form of autobiography, exploration of self, and affirmation of female experience. Some audiences used "autobiographical" in a pejorative sense; "self-indulgent" and "narcissistic" were dismissals of feminist work. However, within the women's community such work was seen within the context of the then-common process of consciousness-raising and the oft-repeated slogan, "the personal is political." Feminists viewing autobiographical work could readily locate an individual woman's experience within an emerging analysis of women's oppression. For this audience, feminist art was not narcissistic but profoundly political.

But for any audience unfamiliar with feminist ideology, making the connection between individual women's experiences and a larger social context was often a frustrating task. The therapeutic working through of personal experiences (particularly common in performance art) was inaccessible to many audiences, who were ill-equipped to recognize the political significance of women's stories. For these audiences, the inaccessibility of the work recalled the insular quality of the narcissist. They saw the artist as wrapped up in herself, much as the narcissist is trapped in her/himself. Without a shared political ideology (or

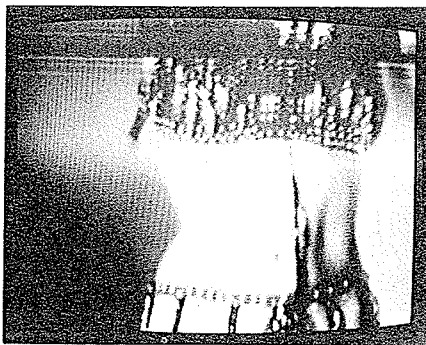
\*Aside from delineating the psychological condition of narcissism, "narcissistic" will describe social phenomena symptomatic of the narcissistic personality and artworks which mimic the psychology of the narcissist. The term will not be employed in a qualitative, vernacular, or metaphorical sense.

\*Martha Rosler considers the problem of defining feminist art:

... obviously, not all women are feminists. Neither does an identification with the women artists' movement imply any necessary commitment to feminism (which I see as necessitating a principled criticism of economic and social power relations and some commitment to collective actions). Nor does a conscious identification with feminism make one's art necessarily feminist.<sup>2</sup>

My use of this definition is meant to delineate a specific type of politically engaged artwork, rather than to judge quality or "correctness."

\*In early psychological research, "narcissism" was used by Havelock Ellis to refer to autoeroticism. Later, Freud adopted the term in his libido theory to describe a condition in which the ego turns its energy back on itself, rather than directing it toward others. Freud distinguished between primary narcissism (a healthy stage of ego development) and a secondary narcissism (a pathological condition in which the ego becomes the sole object of its love).



Joan Jonas. *Vertical Roll* (1972). Photo by Richard Landry.

at least the shared experience of being female), some audiences were unable to see the personal revelations of feminist art as anything but narcissistic. Avoiding inaccessible and narcissistic representations remains a challenge to artists addressing political issues through autobiographical work.

Recently, "narcissism" has been used to describe everything from jogging and health foods to the human potential movement, straying far from the clinical label for a character disorder.<sup>4</sup> This application of the psychological term to a series of sociological phenomena is not without problems. Using "narcissism" to describe cultural phenomena risks encouraging "psychological explanations and cures for trends that are social in origin."<sup>5</sup> One may mistakenly locate the source of the narcissistic or alienating culture in the personality of the individual, encouraging only individual psychotherapeutic cures for social problems. However, to limit the use of narcissism to a psychologist's label\* obscures the dialectical relationship of the individual to the society which produces her/him: while the narcissist doesn't create the social order, s/he plays a crucial role in the maintenance of the socioeconomic order. Theodor Adorno cautions:

*The separation of society and psyche is false consciousness; it perpetuates conceptually the split between the living subject and the objectivity that governs the subjects and yet derives from them.<sup>6</sup>*

Specifics of feminine narcissism are at odds with feminist representation. Feminine narcissism results from a basic mechanism of women's oppression: the emphasis placed on women's appearance.<sup>7</sup> Patriarchal cultures demand narcissism of women and simultaneously disparage women for their self-obsession. As Simone de Beauvoir has written: "conditions lead woman, more than man, to turn toward her-

self and devote her love to herself.”<sup>8</sup> What are these conditions? Economic and social relations which require women to gain access to power (albeit cosmetic power) via men make a preoccupation with the self nothing less than a survival tactic for women. For a woman to relinquish her narcissism, to stop presenting herself as an object of delectation, is to abandon the privileges allotted to her.

An art which reproduces narcissism, and a hierarchical artworld which requires self-aggrandizement, aligns itself with the social relations\* of domination required in a corporate structure. Literature on mass media suggests that the narcissist is the ideal personality in a consumer economy, since s/he will participate in endless consumption when confronted with advertising which appeals to the enhancement of self.<sup>10</sup> A narcissistic art implies a tacit acceptance of the self-obsession so crucial to the maintenance of an expansive economic system.

There are unique characteristics of video art which predispose it to narcissistic uses. Critics Rosalind Krauss and Stuart Marshall have commented on the narcissistic character of video produced by both men and women.<sup>11</sup> They locate the source of narcissism in video in the apparatus of video production, which has certain structural similarities to a mirror. When an artist sets up a simple closed circuit of camera monitor, s/he performs for her/himself in a nonreversing mirror. Stuart Marshall comments:

*To describe this situation [of video art production] as narcissistic is not to use the term in a vague and qualitative sense, but to point to the actual inter-subjective structures that the technology reproduces in its structure. The idealized body image takes on the significance of the master image, which is the self-aggrandizement of the subject.<sup>12</sup>*

Artists' video developed when artists were becoming increasingly aware of the need for self-promotion. The cultivation of an image—of one's self and one's art as a distinctive product—is essential for success in the art marketplace. Under these conditions of production, an artist's videotape acts as a television commercial for the artist. Tapes can be mailed almost anywhere for viewing, and unlike postal art or artists' books, video can be shown to mass audiences. (Recall Chris Burden's videotape shown on late-night televi-



Lynda Benglis. *Document* (1972).

\*Joel Kovel points out that the narcissist is often "a perfectly well-functioning citizen" but has "a peculiar veneer-like quality of social relations" that lacks any depth of attachment and any "notion of transcendence of universality... the narcissistic character is unable to affirm a unity of project or purpose, a common goal, with other people in a way that goes beyond immediacy or instrumentality. They do fine with the rules for everyday alienated discourse, but cannot go beyond and therefore are lost to class-consciousness, history, and necessarily the future."<sup>9</sup>



Marge Dean. *Streamlining* (1980). Photo by Marge Dean.



Marge Dean. *Things Have Changed over the Years* (1980). Photo by Marge Dean.



Martha Rosler. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977). Photo by Martha Rosler.

sion. Burden listed his name in a sequence of famous artists: Michelangelo... da Vinci... Chris Burden.) Video, if only because of its particular capacities in the production of art stars, tends to entail a character of self-aggrandizement.

Women producing video haven't escaped the narcissism prompted by the technology and promoted by the structure of the art market. Tapes by Linda Benglis (*Collage, Now, On Screen, and Document*), Hermine Freed (*Two Faces*), and Joan Jonas (*Duet, Left Side/Right Side, and Vertical Roll*) have all been discussed as examples of the aesthetics of narcissism.<sup>13</sup> These works share a particular use of the medium in which "cameras and mixers equipped with mirror reversal and image combination facilities allow for the making of complex electronic mirrors, where a present self interacts with the image of one or more past selves."<sup>14</sup> In these "self-portraits" the artists bracket out all but the objects of their immediate concern—themselves. Such bracketing out of the world is analogous to the narcissist's withdrawal into her/himself. However, it would be a mistake to believe, as Marshall asserts, that these works carry a "political insistence" because their makers are women.<sup>15</sup> Simply representing the condition of narcissism does not constitute a critique of the condition or of the social relations which produce self-obsession. Such representation reifies the process of narcissism, providing no insight into the complex social relations involved in its formation.

Joan Jonas' images of herself exploring the video medium exemplify the problem of the inadvertent reified representation of narcissism. *Vertical Roll* is a series of images taped off of a monitor in which the vertical hold has been adjusted to establish a steady vertical motion of passing frames. The image and sound of Jonas tapping a spoon set up one rhythm; the steady jumping of the image, another. The image, the sound, and the flickering of the screen move in and out of phase. The sound of the tapping of the spoon continues with a variety of vertically rolling images—Jonas moving her feet back and forth, wearing a mask, walking and running in place, turning her hand palm up, palm down. Her motion and the camera movement are subordinate to the steady motion created within the electronics of the monitor. One has the sense of being trapped by the technology: while trying to in-

vest the image with some status of reality, one is constantly confronted with the reality of electronic mediation. Jonas and her image are insulated, bracketed between the camera and the monitor, much as the narcissist is trapped between the self and the image of self. And the spectator's frustrated attempts to disavow the presence of the monitor<sup>16</sup> echo the narcissist's futile desire to be simultaneously the subject and the object of her/his own love. Jonas' unintentional enactment of narcissism in *Vertical Roll* is an aside: secondary to her concern with rhythm, form, and the technology of the medium. In *On Screen* and *Document*, Linda Benglis positions herself between the camera and the monitor, enclosed between the electronic gaze of the camera and the nonreversing reflection of the monitor. Again, the pervading undertone of narcissism leaves a sense of the inevitability of feminine self-obsession. Jonas' and Benglis' early video reproduces the characteristics of narcissism unintentionally, neither critiquing the cultural sources of the condition nor investigating its prevalence among women.

How do feminist artists, committed to producing politically engaged artworks, confront the narcissism encouraged by the artworld, prompted by the video apparatus, and attributed to feminist art? Several strategies are employed. Working in a documentary mode or devising a narrative using actors are two direct ways of avoiding a narcissistic representation. The simplest means is to turn the camera onto the world, rather than pointing it at oneself. In the more problematic case of a feminist dealing with autobiographical material or the perception of self, turning the camera on oneself is not only appropriate, but necessary. How do feminists avoid the representational problem of narcissism in tapes about personal experiences and in work where they're the "stars"? Considering the work of Martha Rosler, Marge Dean, Nancy Angelo, and Candace Compton offers some answers to this question.

Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* addresses the issue of the perception of self, but her theoretical stance in relation to the subject forestalls a narcissistic reading of the tape. In real-time footage Rosler is systematically undressed and measured by two white-coated technicians. Three female assistants appear, each employing a noisemaker (a bell, a ka-

zoo) to indicate whether her measurements are above average, average, or below average. After this seemingly interminable procedure ends, Rosler is led away by the women, who assist her in dressing, alternately, in a white gown and a black evening dress. The two sequences of Rosler being dressed are intercut, creating a virgin/whore montage and concluding the real-time footage. Throughout this first act Rosler presents her analysis through the voice-over, discussing dehumanization through testing and measurement and scientific "truth" as a means of social control. Rosler talks about the construction of the feminine self:

*Her mind learns to think of her body as something different from her self. It learns to think, perhaps without awareness, of her body as having "parts." These parts are to be judged. The self has already learned to attach value to itself. To see itself as a whole entity with an external vision. She sees herself from the outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who has within her the critical standards of the ones who judge.<sup>17</sup>*

One could argue that Rosler's nude appearance in *Vital Statistics* necessitates a narcissistic reading of the work. Such a stance fails to consider the distancing Rosler develops by placing herself relatively far away from a fixed camera. No closeups or cuts are used to titillate the audience or to break the tedium of the measuring procedure. There are no slow pans up a calf to a thigh, no cuts to parted lips. She interrupts the voyeuristic pleasure attributed to traditional narrative film and television devices<sup>18</sup> by producing the image of a clinical, bureaucratic stripping, rather than a seductive burlesque.

Although Rosler's theoretical stance and camera location distance the audience from her image, the work raises an issue that has plagued women's body art. Lucy Lippard notes:

*Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces or bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism. There is an element of exhibitionism in all body art, perhaps a legitimate result of the choice between exploiting oneself or someone else. Yet the degree to which narcissism informs the work varies immensely. Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is*

*doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.<sup>19</sup>*

The narcissist and the exhibitionist share an enslavement to the attention of others. But Rosler appears not as the exhibitionist, the image to be admired, but as the anonymous statistic of a totally administered environment. Her role as anonymous subject, combined with her analysis of the self-scrutiny requisite to "femininity" and the use of deerotized camera, work to preclude a narcissistic reading of *Vital Statistics*.

Marge Dean appears in two of her tapes, *Things Have Changed Over the Years* and *Streamlining*, yet also resists tendencies toward narcissism. In *Things Have Changed* Dean sits behind a table, eating foods from various diets of the last century. Titles indicate the time period, while the audio track is a litany of diets published between 1890 and the present. Intercut with shots of Dean eating are titles noting historical events in popular culture (such as the publication of the best-seller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*). In *Streamlining* a text from an exercise manual of the same name is montaged with a discussion of streamlining in industrial design. Intercut with images of the exercise manual and advertisements selling streamlined products of the 1940's and 50's are sequences of Dean performing the exercises prescribed for obtaining a svelte figure. Dean locates the phenomenon of slimming in a historical context. Within the narcissistic culture there is a loss of continuity with, and concern for, history, but her attention to the historical placement of her subjects prevents that "trapped in the moment" perception of time.

Both Dean and Rosler use fixed cameras that disrupt the scopophilia (pleasure in looking) associated with traditional narrative film and video techniques (closeups, quick cuts, zooming, panning, tracking). Whether or not the destruction of the viewing pleasure provided by television and film forms is essential to a feminist video or film is not at issue here, but it is worth noting that avoiding traditional camera moves proves useful in circumventing the narcissistic tendencies of video. Along with their camera strategies and their location of a private experience within either a theoretical analysis or a historical period,

both Dean and Rosler address the issue of women's appearance. Feminine narcissism is encouraged (if not directly produced) by the *cultural* emphasis on women's appearance. Their tapes stand unalterably opposed to externally imposed standards of feminine beauty. Certainly this stance, along with a placement of private experience in a larger framework and deerotized camera work, informs their production of video that refuses to mimic the psychology of the narcissist.

Candace Compton and Nancy Angelo employ another strategy in their production of *The Nun and the Deviant*. Collaboration, or any collective production, confronts the isolation and individualism endemic to the narcissistic condition. The narcissist cannot have an intimate relationship; the dialogue of their collaboration militates against this isolation. *The Nun and the Deviant* opens with Angelo and Compton sitting at a table in a parking lot, dressing up as their respective characters. They converse: "Candace, could you pass me my..." In a whispered second soundtrack, they talk about their process of collaboration, about their fears and hesitations: "All the images are Candace's" or "I'm afraid of being misunderstood, caring more about this than her." After dressing, each character speaks in a closeup shot, exposing the failure of her character. The nun says, "Forgive me, I'm guilty, I can't serve you properly." The deviant says, "I'm no good, I just pretend, I steal, I'm not sincere, believe me." While one speaks the other stands in the background smashing dishes. Each expresses her anger and frustration: the nun complains that she's always expected to be good; the deviant insists that she actually is a good person. The confessional nature of this work and the use of personal experience without any pointed analysis could easily lead the viewer to a narcissistic reading of *The Nun and the Deviant* were it not for the obvious collaborative element.

The development of alter egos, fictitious doubles or "twins," a common practice among women performance artists, is also an aspect of the narcissistic personality. Simone de Beauvoir describes this aspect of the narcissist, who "builds up a double that is often sketchy, but who sometimes constitutes a definite personage whose role the woman plays for life."<sup>20</sup> She notes that "the mirror is not the only means of obtaining a double, though the most

avored. Everyone can create a twin through inward dialogue."<sup>21</sup> The nun and the deviant are created out of an inward dialogue, but their collaboration resists the isolated introspection of the narcissist. Angelo and Compton have produced a tape which plays on the subtle distinctions between a pointless self-obsession and the self-reflection essential for self-determination and political change. Their work reminds one of the easily forgotten distinction between productive self-examination and the crippling self-scrutiny of the narcissist.

Some strategies used by feminist video artists that prevent a narcissistic representation have been noted; others may have been overlooked or may be still in the making. Feminist artists must continue to invent forms which



Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton. *The Nun and the Deviant*. Photo by Ek Waller.

oppose oppressive representations of women, while exposing the basis of women's subjugation. Women can no longer overlook problems in representation because these problems are based in a social structure and technology which is not of their design. Instead, feminist artists must be as uncompromising in their work toward forms free of narcissism as they are unrelenting in the struggle for a culture which doesn't require self-aggrandizement and reward self-obsession. A feminist representation that contradicts and critiques the image of woman as narcissist creates an edge for representing and, ultimately, reconstructing the female self.

I'd like to thank Helen de Michiel, Sandy Flitterman, Patricia Patterson, and Moria Roth for their thoughtful comments. Special thanks go to Mary Linn Hughes for her continuous support and to Allan Sekula, whose initial suggestions and encouragement were instrumental in developing this text.

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Micki McGee works with video, photographs, text, and performance. Her work is concerned with gender, language, and social order.

# EDITORIAL

The material we received was primarily ahistorical. Women wrote descriptions of sex with a particular person at a particular moment, with little attention to issues of development, disintegration, adaptation, accommodation, reconciliation, or resignation. Many of us looked for documentation of how passion changes into domesticated sex, of how passion is kept alive, of how friendship drifts into a sexual arrangement. It is more difficult to describe and analyze change, as we are socialized to attend to the static elements rather than the dynamic. The princess undoubtedly did not live happily ever after, nor did her stepmother die at the stake. Sex is embedded in everyday life. That's what makes it complicated and most interesting. The static view is safe, but ultimately dangerous. It permits us to objectify others as discrete events in our lives. It keeps us from recognizing our responsibility as agents of change.



Barbara Kruger. *Perfect* (1981). Photo by D. James Dee. Barbara Kruger is an artist in NYC.

# NEWS FLASH

## Lesbian and Gay Rights

*Whereas*, The National Organization for Women's commitment to equality, freedom, justice, and dignity for all women is singularly affirmed in NOW's advocacy of Lesbian rights; and

*Whereas*, NOW deines Lesbian rights issues to be those in which the issue is discrimination based on affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

*Whereas*, There are other issues (i.e., pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex) which have been mistakenly correlated with Lesbian/Gay rights by some gay organizations and by opponents of Lesbian/Gay rights who seek to confuse the issue, and

*Whereas*, Pederasty is an issue of exploitation or violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

*Whereas*, Pornography is an issue of exploitation and violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

*Whereas*, Sadomasochism is an issue of violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

*Whereas*, Public sex, when practiced by heterosexuals or homosexuals, is an issue of violation of the privacy rights of non-participants, not an issue of affectional/sexual preference/orientation; and

*Whereas*, NOW does not support the inclusion of pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex as Lesbian rights issues, since to do so would violate the feminist principles upon which this organization was founded; now therefore

*Be it resolved*, That the National Organization for Women adopt the preceding delineation of Lesbian rights issues and non-Lesbian rights issues as the official position of NOW; and

*Be it further resolved* that NOW disseminate this resolution and the resolution concept paper on Lesbian rights issues 1980 attached hereto throughout the National, State, and Local levels of the organization; and

*Be it further resolved* that NOW will work in cooperation with groups and organizations which advocate Lesbian Rights as issues as defined above.

# People Organize to Protest Recent NOW Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights

*At the 1980 Annual NOW Conference this resolution was passed. People active in the feminist, lesbian, and gay communities have expressed their opposition by writing the following statements.*

There are several levels on which the NOW Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights is objectionable. In the first place, it is a tactical mistake to define the purposes of the feminist movement in negative and scapegoating terms. It is self-defeating for NOW to attack pederasty, pornography, and sadomasochism when there is considerable disagreement among feminists about the relation of these issues to violence and exploitation, and when they are being used as mobilizing issues by the most powerful anti-feminist forces on the current political scene.

The resolution also assumes that all feminists share an identical view of what constitutes "correct" sexual behavior. This leads to a kind of ideological lock-step. It tells people how to think and feel and negates fundamental autonomy. This pressure towards homogenization within movements for social change should be forcefully and vigorously resisted.

The undersigned women and men run the full gamut of views regarding the issues raised in the NOW resolution. But we are dealing with the complex and shadowy area of sexuality, an area where very little is known or understood. People making tentative forays into new realms of experience are being treated as if they were monsters and criminals. This is narrow bigotry promulgated under the rubric of loving concern.

Very often those who hold this attitude put forward a hygienic, one-dimensional vision of sexuality. They make dubious distinctions between fantasy and reality, personal and impersonal, the lustful and the erotic. In the course of criticizing cruel, misogynous, unfeeling behavior served up under the banner of sexual liberation, they advance an oversimplified and puritanical ideology. Finally they become allied with reactionary forces which are out to isolate and destroy all those who move beyond conventional boundaries. In giving credence to such ugly stereotypes as the boy-lover as child-molester, they bolster and sanction the pathological anxieties of the

common culture. Since NOW is perceived to such a great degree as representing the feminist movement, the resolution makes all feminists appear to be advocates of timid respectability who automatically repudiate everything that seems strange and different—and at worst allies, however unwitting, of repressive ignorance and prejudice.

Nancy Anderson, Mark Blumberg, Gene Brown, Muriel Dimen, Martin Duberman, Kate Ellis, Nancy Fraser, Susan Harding, Marilyn Kaggen, Helen Lauer, Charles Pitts, Rayna Rapp, Robert Roth, Gayle Rubin, Arnold Sachar, Ann Snitow, Judith Stacey, Carol Vance, Paula Webster, Pete Wilson

*These signatures represent some 150 that have been collected so far and are being sent to NOW.*

March 10, 1981

As feminist activists we are dismayed by NOW's Resolution on Lesbian Rights. At a time when feminists, lesbians, and gay men are struggling against a powerful reactionary movement intent on prohibiting all non-marital, non-procreative forms of sexual expression, it is imperative that we defend in the most uncompromising terms the right to sexual self-determination. Instead, NOW has seen fit to "delineate"—i.e., qualify—its position on lesbian rights by going out of its way to declare specific forms of sexual behavior beyond the pale. Both the tone and the substance of the resolution are offensively moralistic. In its eagerness to assure the public of NOW's commitment to right-thinking respectability, it panders to the new right and to the most conservative, puritanical elements of the women's movement. It is also implicitly homophobic. NOW claims that these "other issues" have nothing to do with gay rights. Yet by the very fact of its using a gay rights resolution as a platform for condemning "undesirable" sexual activity, NOW plays into the erroneous but common belief that homosexuals have a special affinity for such behavior. In effect, the resolution puts gay people on notice that if they want to be acceptable they had better not go too far.

We believe that all people, whatever their sexual preference and predilections, have an inalienable right to freedom of

sexual association with a consenting partner, regardless of whether others approve of their behavior. We therefore support the right of individuals to practice consensual sadomasochism and to use pornography for sexual gratification. Though we agree that much pornography denigrates and objectifies women, we reject the simplistic and demagogic equation of pornography with violence, and the confusion between fantasy and action that this equation implies. We also reject the implicit assumption that there is some objective way to distinguish "pornographic" material from "legitimate" depictions of sex. In practice, condemnations of pornography inevitably strengthen the hand of conservatives who oppose all sexually explicit material.

In condemning "public sex" NOW invokes a concept that is dangerously vague, as is the idea that public sex, whatever it is, violates "the privacy rights of non-participants." What, exactly, does the non-participant have the right not to see? Who gets to decide what behavior is acceptable and what isn't? This vagueness is particularly disturbing in the context of a gay rights resolution, since "public sex" has most often been used as a code phrase meaning any public expression of homosexual affection, even holding hands. We believe that at worst, "public sex" has far less potential for harm than attempts to stamp it out.

The issue of sex between adults and children (not only men and boys) raises serious questions about how to reconcile children's and adolescents' right to sexual autonomy with their right to be protected from exploitation by adults. The resolution does not take up these difficult questions. Rather, by singling out "pederasty" (another loaded word) for condemnation, it merely reinforces the widespread idea that having sex with children is exclusively a gay male phenomenon.

In its appeal to "feminist principles," the resolution enshrines the political views of one faction of the women's movement as *the* feminist position. It implies the existence of a non-existent consensus and suggests that those of us whose feminist principles have led us to different conclusions need not be taken seriously. The effect is to deny the pressing need for debate on controversial questions about sexuality and its relation to feminism. In this way, too, the resolution both reflects and contributes to a repressive political climate.

Rosalyn Baxandall, Bonnie Bellow, Cynthia Carr, Karen Durban, Brett Harvey, M. Mark, Alix Kates Shulman, Ann Snitow, Katy Taylor, Ellen Willis

*Those in essential agreement with these statements can express their concern by sending their own protest to NOW: National Organization for Women, 425 13th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20004.*

# BURNOUT

Some days my cunt is a burden  
I'd like to lose. Don't want it touched,  
submit my face to the vulvas of others  
because of habit, hate the wet and  
slimy circumferences of them, the way the center  
rolls around eel-like, in my way,  
out of my field of vision, far beyond  
my desires. Some days I do it as a duty.

Some days I don't care so much about me  
and want to hear about everybody else.  
My friends who want to discuss sex with me  
yecch but even while saying this I'm  
disgusted, thinking of sopping cunts,  
big vaginas gasping with air, lovers and  
potential lovers. All of it a vat of saliva  
as far as I'm concerned.

Don't wanna be in love anymore, rub my dumb skin  
on the fleshy shoulders of somebody else,  
taking my warm clothes off: how stupid sex is.  
Mugged by someone else's desire, or worse,  
by my own, lying around in a pool of wasted time  
scraping fingernails across thigh hair and  
murmuring dull syllables. Some days I'd prefer  
sitting in a stiff-backed chair chatting with old ladies,

or eating delicate tea-cakes, or knitting calmly,  
anything to keep my clothes on, my pulse steady,  
my eyes open.

**Laura Sky Brown**

Laura Sky Brown, a would-be writer and editor, is presently studying the French press in Strasbourg, France (i.e., reading newspapers and eating a lot of pastries). © 1981 Laura Sky Brown

# EDITORIAL

We are convinced that there are no natural positions, political or otherwise, to take regarding female sexuality. The very fact that no single feminist position could be formulated for our issue speaks to the importance of the activity we have undertaken. We have tried to represent a variety of understandings in relation to the expression and repression of our erotic desires and sexual activities.

The privatized condition of sexuality, the historical denial of women's erotic experiences, and the strategic lack of self-representation in our culture still confine much of our sexuality to language of the bedroom, transmitted over the phone to friends. Indeed, some might erroneously characterize the material in this issue as merely "subjective," implying that the point of view is not critical or analytic, that it fails to make connections to conventional Political issues. We believe, however, that expressions of our subjectivity have been an entrance providing access to the unspeakable.

Despite the feminist insistence that all women share an essential social identity under patriarchy, it is not necessarily true that women share a uniform relationship to sexuality, sexual identity, fantasy, and sexual practice. Is there something we can call female sexuality? And what constitutes its content, boundaries, and uniqueness? Any examination of female sexuality must deal with the impact our socialization into femininity has in maintain-

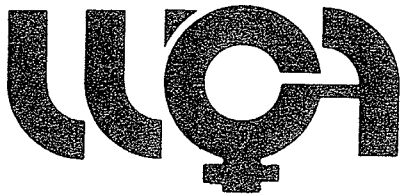


ing the constraints appropriate for gendered sex.

We recognize the need for theoretical exploration to give form and validation to our politics. Yet establishing a theory of female sexuality is an enormous task. The variety of sexual expressions and choices threatens the fiber of a politics based on identification with the category of Woman and the categories of preference which dichotomize us. This issue, at best, brings forward the contradictions which make the formation of a feminist sexual politics problematic. Sexuality is our place of conflict and silence. **SPEAK!**







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**"WE STARTED WITH OUR FEMINIST IDEALS & MAINTAINED THEM..."**

and now business has caught up". Betsy Rogers (Wise Woman Records) told Susan Sturman (Mama Quilla II), whose overview of Women's Music is featured in the FUSE Music Supplement (January '81). Speaking from the inside, Sturman reveals the successes and directions of a thriving industry that is currently making forays into the mainstream, and finding out what that does to its principles.

FUSE focuses on socially relevant contemporary culture which ensures comprehensive women's coverage, such as Women's Performance, the Economic Position of Women within the Arts, the UN Festival of Women Artists, Pornographic Women's Art, and the Multi-media Incest Awareness Project from the Women's Building in Los Angeles. Profiles of contemporary feminist artists like Carolee Schneeman, Martha Rosler, and Susan Britton appear regularly, and then of course there are reviews of books, films, videotapes, exhibitions, records, perfor-

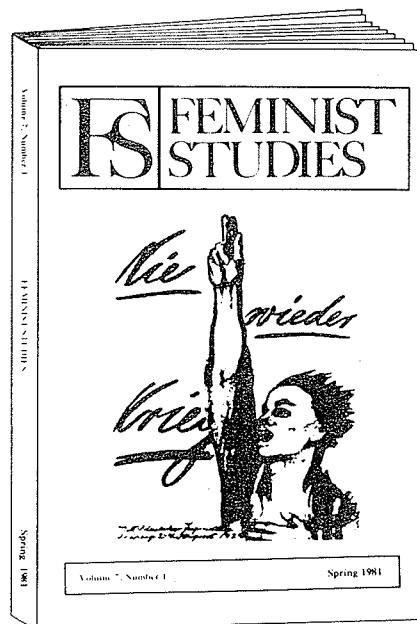
mances — alternative works by and for women.

Outside of the cultural field, features on Women & Infanticide, the Criminalization of Immigrant Women, Makeup as Mask, Anorexia Nervosa, Unionized Women vs. Surveillance Systems, Censorship & Women, Strippers Unionizing, and Media Access for Women have appeared in the past two years.

In all, we think that FUSE might be the sort of resource you could use. Write to us for a sample copy at the address below.

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HERESIES is an idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective. We believe that what is commonly called art can have a political impact, and that in the making of art and of all cultural artifacts our identities as women play a distinct role. We hope that HERESIES will stimulate dialogue around radical political and aesthetic theory, encourage the writing of the history of *femina sapiens*, and generate new creative energies among women. It will be a place where diversity can be articulated. We are committed to the broadening of the definition and function of art.

HERESIES is structured as a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, marxists, lesbian feminists, or anarchists; our fields include painting, sculpture, writing, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture, and filmmaking. While the themes of the individual issues will be determined by the collective, each issue will have a different editorial staff made up of women who want to work on that issue as well as members of the collective. Proposals for issues may be conceived and presented to the HERESIES Collective by groups of women not associated with the collective. Each issue will take a different visual form, chosen by the group responsible. HERESIES will try to be accountable to and in touch with the international feminist community. An open evaluation meeting will be held after the appearance of each issue. Topics for issues will be announced well in advance in order to collect material from many sources. Letters will be printed to continue the discussion from previous issues. In addition, HERESIES pro-

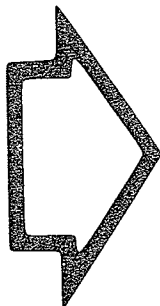
vides training for women who work editorially, in design and in production, both on-the-job and through workshops.

As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts, and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. As a step toward a demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women. We are not committed to any particular style or aesthetic, or to the competitive mentality that pervades the art world. Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art.

**HERESIES Collective:** Ida Applebroog, Lyn Blumenthal, Cynthia Carr, Sue Heinemann, Elizabeth Hess, Arlene Ladden, Lucy R. Lippard, Melissa Meyer, Carrie Rickey, Elizabeth Sacre, Elke Solomon

**Associate Members:** Patsy Beckert, Joan Braderman, Mary Beth Edelson, Janet Froelich, Harmony Hammond, Joyce Kozloff, Marty Pottenger, Miriam Schapiro, Amy Sillman, Pat Steir, May Stevens, Joan Snyder, Michelle Stuart, Susana Torre, Elizabeth Weatherford, Sally Webster, Nina Yankowitz

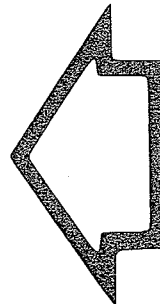
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### A NEW LETTERS SECTION

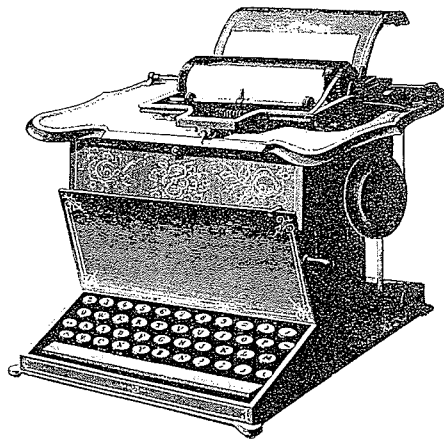
What are your responses to the material in this issue? Do you agree? Disagree? Have something to add?

We want to hear your reactions. And we want to publish them. HERESIES will now regularly feature several pages of letters. We hope this will generate an ongoing dialogue around issues raised in the magazine.



**#13 Feminism and Ecology.** Personal and political analyses of the relationship between ecological and feminist issues: Politics (consumer awareness, population control, pollution, and environmental hazards), Art (art that respects and affects the environment), Science (redefining the uses of science, ethics, and experimentation), Life Styles (utopias, how urban and rural women view the land, responsible fashion, appropriate technology, the counter-culture as reactionary and conservation as radical).

**#14 Feminist Groups Are You Still Out There?** What actions or projects are you working on? This issue will collect papers, conversations, posters, broadsides, blueprints, magazine pieces—anything verbal or visual that tells us specifically what you are planning and why, what circumstances led you to these concerns. We are soliciting material from progressive political and cultural groups all over the world. Please submit an outline, proposal, or synopsis immediately.



### TAX-EXEMPT

HERESIES is now tax-exempt. All contributions are tax-deductible (retroactive to Sept. 16, 1976). We need your help to survive. Any amount you can contribute will be enormously helpful.

**Guidelines for Contributors.** Each issue of HERESIES has a specific theme and all material submitted should relate to that theme. We welcome outlines and proposals for articles and visual work. Manuscripts (one to five thousand words) should be typewritten, double-spaced, and submitted in duplicate. Visual material should be submitted in the form of a slide, xerox, or photograph. We will not be responsible for original art work. All manuscripts and visual material must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. We do not publish reviews or monographs on contemporary women. We do not commission articles and cannot guarantee acceptance of submitted material. HERESIES pays a small fee for published material.

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