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“WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD:”  
FEMINISM, SEX AND THE PROBLEM OF SM, 1969-1993

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Where Angels Fear to Tread:”Feminism, Sex and the Problem of SM, 1969-1993

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This study is the first to document the history of the lesbian sadomasochist (SM) community and demonstrates its impact of the feminist Sex Wars in the United States between 1969 and 1993. Bringing together foundational literature and methods of inquiry from women’s studies, queer theory and the history of other excluded social groups, my dissertation highlights issues of power, resistance and collective identity formation. Drawing on newspaper articles and other published sources, archival research and oral histories, I argue that one cannot understand the history of movements for gender, sexual and sexuality equality without also understanding this issue. This project charts the evolution of feminist sexual theory from the 1960s through the 1990s, illuminates ruptures in feminist and gay/lesbian liberation theory and practice and reveals the history and the long-lasting implications of these debates. I show how lesbian SM helped to shape the pornography debates, the development of both queer theory and the field of sexuality studies and was integral to major shifts in American politics and culture in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive

Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival"

For what is life but reaching for an answer?  
And what is death but a refusal to grow?

Mary Oliver, "Magellan"

*for Jo*

*who spoke so that we might live instead of just survive  
and was the first to speak to me of our history ...*

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First and foremost, I offer many pranams to my Higher Power, in all manifestations of gods, goddesses and prophets. The gifts I have been given are immeasurable and matched only by my humble gratitude and hope that I have done and continue to do the best with what I have been given.

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New York boys of Leather supplied much needed laughter and camaraderie. Bobbie, Diane, Nancy and the other yoga teachers and students of Soma Center created a refuge that renewed my soul and gave me the strength to follow this sometimes arduous path. The Rutgers women's basketball team showed me that I could care about sports and I am grateful for Jewel Daney and her cohort of fans who embraced my sporting ignorance. A broad range of fellow graduate students from a wide range of departments, together with their friends and families, helped me feel a real sense of community in Highland Park. And the sisters of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival yearly create a home that I return to each August. I am particularly grateful for the folks of Alternative Family Camping: Atessa, Aunti Laura, Chris, Kimberly, K.O., Marty, Scout, Shelley and SMr.bS Treat. I can't thank you enough for the laughter and the fun, but most of all, for the cuddles.

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I've often said that everyone should have someone who is one step ahead of them in graduate school and that is because I had Sarah Cushman as that friend for me, always there with a kind and timely word of encouragement. Similarly, Susan Menahem cannot be thanked enough for her advice, comfort and guidance. Bella, Jenean Rombola, Marc Germain and Jeff Nilsen also deserve recognition for their friendship throughout the years; I am so glad each of them are still in my life. Levi Halberstadt has served as my Chief of Staff, best friend and Leather brother essentially since the day we met. I am eternally grateful for his willingness to "stand in the fire with me and not shrink back."

Thank you to my extensive family of origin who, though they often did not understand what I was doing or why, continued to offer me love and support. In particular, I am thankful to all three of my parents, Rachel and Steven Barra and Stephen Warner, and my godmother, Mary Brady. My sister and brother-in-law, Emily and Rabindra Misir, provided many smiles and laughter, not to mention two incredible nieces, Faith and Devi, who've helped me remember why we are here. Thank you also to the Terrells, for the gifts of acceptance and love, but most importantly for the love of my life.

Words cannot express the depth of the gratitude I feel for the person who sees and loves me best. Amber, thank you, my angel, for every time you washed my mug, left me alone so I could write, and most of all, for the times you ignored or forgave my insanity that was part and parcel of completing this project. I know I can never repay you for the kindness, compassion and love you've given me, but I will spend the rest of my life trying.

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## **Introduction**

It is nearly impossible to read the news or watch television in the U.S. and not feel the impact of the Meese Commission and the “Sex Wars” of the 1980s. Whether it is the ubiquity of the porn industry or the ongoing crisis over child pornography, the recommendations of the Commission and the debates that it intensified had a profound effect on American culture. Indeed there is widespread agreement that porn matters. What is less well known is that second wave feminist debates and practices profoundly influenced these national discussions. The inability of second wave feminists to successfully resolve the apparent contradictions between sexual freedom and women’s liberation, highlighted in debates over pornography, directly led to the curious position of porn in American culture today. Those debates, moreover, were often focused on one particular type of material: sado-masochistic (SM) porn. This dissertation maps not only the historical context of feminist engagement with SM porn and its significant turning points but also the profound impact of these debates on multiple levels. One of the most significant effects was the creation of a new sexual identity and community, that of lesbian sadomasochist or Leatherdyke.

It was not until I began research for my dissertation that I had any inkling what it must have been like for early women’s historians to do their research. As I explored the various published sources for information on women in the Leather community and their connection to the feminist movement, I was dismayed that these women’s lives and experiences were marginalized or completely absent. I then went to archives and discovered primary sources that demonstrated that the history did exist; it just needed to be gathered and analyzed. To ensure this history is not lost and to demonstrate its

significance to debates over sexuality, identity, consent and freedom, I analyzed existing sources and created new ones via oral histories. By using rare original sources, this dissertation offers insight into broad social movements and their legacies during the late twentieth century and highlights their ongoing influence on US American culture.

First, this study explains the creation and expansion of the Leatherdyke community of the United States from 1969 to 1993. Leatherdykes are defined as self-identifying queer or bisexual women, lesbians or dykes who participate in consensual sado-masochistic<sup>1</sup>, SM, behavior. They formed a self-conscious community in the late 1970s and 1980s, first identified as lesbian sado-masochist and later referred to by the euphemism “Leather.” I then explore how the nascent collective expanded—highlighting issues of identity and community formation. Conflicts and alliances with other groups are not the only challenges that Leatherdykes confronted however; the dissertation also uncovers, delineates and explains the many issues, debates and struggles among Leatherdykes. Finally, this community stands at the center of a complicated intersection of social movements for equality and justice rooted in sex, gender and sexual preference. Setting analyses of the early Leatherdyke community and the controversies surrounding their values and practices in the broader context of feminist, gay and mainstream debates, I argue that they developed out of the intersection of gay male Leather and lesbian-feminist movements. This created an unlikely union of (often contentious) theories and practices that laid the groundwork for the development of queer theory and the field of

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<sup>1</sup> Sadomasochism is, for the purposes of this study, defined in the broadest of terms to mean receiving sexual pleasure from either giving (sadism) or receiving (masochism) of physical pain, participating in power-based role play (such as dominance and submission), and/or bondage. While the term BDSM (Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, Masochism) is more frequently used to define these behaviors in modern parlance, these pleasures, desires and behaviors were not delineated as such during the historical period covered in this study.

sexuality studies.

Situating the creation and expansion of this community in a broader historical context, this dissertation investigates the connections and tensions between second wave feminist theory and practice and the marginalized, nascent women's Leather groups. I chart the evolution of feminist sexual theory from the 1960s through the 1990s, underscoring the historical significance of the Leatherdyke community by illustrating the centrality of the issue of SM to the feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s. These debates had long-lasting implications, including the American obsession with controlling pornography. I argue that one cannot understand the history of movements for gender, sexual and sexuality equality which have profoundly shaped the last thirty years of U.S. history without understanding the contours and development of the problem of SM, and the community that formed as a result. Only through analyzing Leatherdykes—which brings together second wave feminists with advocates of queer rights, transgender liberation and sexual freedom—can one truly understand American politics of sexuality, including issues such as gay rights and pornography. At the same time, my dissertation illuminates broader trends in American cultural and political history. It underscores both the mutually-constitutive roles of identity and community and the central tension between individual freedom of expression and the protection of individual rights, which lay at the heart of liberalism. This dissertation elucidates the impact of these theoretical problems, inspired by a relatively small community, on both American culture and transnational debates about gender, sexuality, power and violence.

The dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One charts the evolution of feminist sexual theory from 1969 to 1977, highlighting the development of ideas about

sexual violence in general and sado-masochism in particular. It demonstrates that, despite historical characterizations to the contrary, SM was not a new issue in the Sex Wars. Indeed there was a time when discussions about the possibility of feminist SM were largely respectful and inquisitive. Chapter Two shifts focus from the broader women's movement to the creation of the first community of lesbian sado-masochists, underscoring the intersection of gay male Leather and lesbian-feminist ideas about sex and politics as central driving forces in that community's formation. It also demonstrates that the community was highly focused on education and uncovers the many ongoing conflicts among its members and between this group and other feminist groups between 1978 and 1982. Looking at the same four years, Chapter Three, then, shifts the focus back to the broader feminist movement, highlighting the development of an anti-SM campaign and the polarization of the second wave in the lead-up to the 1982 Feminist and the Scholar Conference.

Chapter Four takes up the immediate events surrounding the Feminist and the Scholar Conference, held at Barnard College. It uncovers not only the controversy that surrounded the event but also its profound impact on the feminist community in the days, months and years following. Indeed, the conference stands at the heart of the so-called Sex Wars, which pitted anti-pornography activists against the emerging sex-positive movement as the women's movement grappled with the difficulties of defining a feminist analysis of sexuality. Chapter Five shifts the focus back to the nascent lesbian sado-masochist community, illustrating its expansion both geographically and politically, and explaining how the negative impact of the Sex Wars led to a shift in focus for these women. It traces the community's development of its own small economy and press as

well as a distinctive set of standards, practices, ethics and boundaries in the decade after Barnard. Focusing on those same years, Chapter Six elucidates the impact of lesbian sado-masochism, via the Sex Wars, on feminist sexual theory and practice, American political campaigns against pornography, and academic scholarship. Finally, it highlights how American ideas about freedom of expression and personal protection led to problems within the feminist community as well as unresolved dilemmas surrounding SM.

Even as the dissertation maps out the debates and events chronologically, it also grapples with a number of important theoretical questions and quandries. By examining these historical developments in the context of other histories and through the lens of a wide-range of theoretical interventions by feminist and queer scholars, this dissertation contributes to current conversations on a number of levels. Bringing the histories of second wave feminism and queer liberation into conversation with one another and investigating the specific history of queer women involved in the SM community, it expands critical conversations about gender and sexuality, simultaneously illustrating the complicated and interdependent nature of the categories and outlining the genealogies of the queer turn. It analyzes the creation, expansion and transformation of the women's SM community over time, carrying the story from the second into the third wave of feminism and elucidating the deep connections between these two phases of feminist theory and practice. At the same time, the dissertation speaks to the central role of identity in community development, while also outlining the challenges that plague identity-based community building. The study draws on newspaper articles, archival research and oral history, while employing the foundational literature and methods of inquiry from women's studies, queer theory and the history of other excluded social groups.

At the same time, this is a recuperative project. While there has been much important work done regarding the histories of gay and lesbian communities, still, the field is small, and as with any new area of scholarship, there are numerous gaps—including, significantly, any academic history of lesbian sadomasochists. George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, Nan Boyd’s *Wide Open Town*, John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, Leila Rupp’s *A Desired Past*, and Eric Marcus’ *Making Gay History* offer a wide range of both local and national perspectives on the broader gay and lesbian communities. Yet none deal with subcultures and conflicts within the lesbian community in the post-Stonewall era.<sup>2</sup> Esther Newton’s *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* stands as an exception to this literature, focusing on an island subculture both before and after Stonewall, but Newton’s work shows that women in general and feminism in particular were marginal in that male-dominated world, where most women’s primary identity was as a homosexual rather than as women and that their lives were “entwined with that of men.”<sup>3</sup> Even within the broader category of gay history, there are only a few, albeit important, works that discuss the specific history of gay/lesbian women. Kennedy and Davis’ monograph on the history of the Buffalo lesbian scene from the 1930s to the 1960s highlights working-class and racial tensions and the rise of butch-fem culture while Lillian Faderman’s history of twentieth-century lesbian life in the United States offers an important overview of the changing nature of lesbian existence, emphasizing their lives as women. Most recently, Marcia Gallo’s *Different Daughters* offers a much needed political history of the first lesbian group, the Daughters of Bilitis. Still, its focus, too,

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<sup>2</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994); Nan Amilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Leila Rupp, *A Desired Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History* (New York: Perennial Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 232.



remains on the pre-Stonewall era. This dissertation is the first to recuperate the history of lesbian sado-masochists and to incorporate that history into the histories of gay and lesbian life and highlights post-Stonewall developments and debates.

In addition, this project contributes to an expanding body of academic literature investigating sado-masochistic sexualities by focusing on the lives of women—something that has yet to be done. Margaret Hanly's collection, *Essential Papers on Masochism*, is a useful gathering of critical essays and theories on masochism, though as she admits, there is very little on woman-to-woman SM. John K. Noyes similarly admits to the absence of female subjectivity in his study, *Mastery of Submission*. Nevertheless he contributes greatly to the field as he charts the invention of the category of masochist, skillfully demonstrating the evolution of the concept over the last century and contextualizing the political and social ramifications of the label at every turn. The absence of women's SM practices from academic studies was addressed for the first time by Lynda Hart's groundbreaking study, *Between the Body and the Flesh*. In it, Hart highlights the performance of SM practices by lesbians, offering readings and analysis of this politically-charged and little understood sexuality, yet its focus remains wholly on the discourse of lesbian SM and not on the experiences of actual Leatherdykes or their communities. Following in Hart's path, Karmen MacKendrick includes lesbian Leathersex in her study of non-normative pleasures, *Counterpleasures*, though she reads sadism and masochism from a philosophical perspective—rather than focusing on the lived experiences of these women.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Hanly, *Essential Papers on Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); John K. Noyes, *Mastery of Submission* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Karen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

These academic studies are joined to a broad cross-section of literature by and about various aspects of the SM/Leather community. There are several how-to manuals, including but not limited to Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's *The Topping Book* and *The Bottoming Book*, as well as Jay Wiseman's *SM 101*. Additionally there are numerous books of S/M porn that cater specifically to the queer and even the Leatherdyke community, including many titles by Pat Califia such as *No Mercy*, *Melting Point* and *Macho Sluts*. Furthermore, there are a variety of books that discuss the philosophy, theories and practices of S/M, such as Mark Thompson's *Leatherfolk*.<sup>5</sup> Among the community-produced texts are various pieces of Leather history, yet none provide a national perspective on the experiences or history of Leatherdykes. In 1995, Tony DeBlase produced an impressive ninety-five-page history of the Leather community, yet women broadly and lesbians in particular are noticeably marginalized. Rob Bienvenu's dissertation and forthcoming book, "The Development of Sadomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States," sketches a wonderful history of SM in the US but focuses mainly on the period from the 1930s through the 1970s and on heterosexual and gay male SM. Gayle Rubin's unpublished dissertation, "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960 – 1990" similarly focuses on the development of gay-male SM culture. The only known written history of any Leatherdyke community appears in SAMOIS' *Coming to Power* (an anthology of porn, how-to and theory), in which there is one article, written by Pat Califia, that discusses her

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<sup>5</sup> Dossie Easton & Janet Hardy, *The New Bottoming Book* (Emeryville CA: Greenery Press, 2001); Dossie Easton & Janet Hardy, *The New Topping Book* (Emeryville CA: Greenery Press, 2003); Jay Wiseman, *SM 101* (San Francisco CA: Greenery Press, 1996); Pat Califia, *No Mercy* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 2000); Pat Califia, *Melting Point* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 2000); Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988); Mark Thompson, Ed., *Leatherfolk* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991).

version of the rise of the Leatherdyke community in San Francisco up to the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this dissertation will enrich the existing literature by adding a much needed historical perspective on the lives of SM women.

As with other recuperative projects, this one was not without its challenges. To study a group of people whose lives were marginalized at the time and whose lives are still highly suspect, certainly taboo and perhaps illegal (depending on state laws), has meant a long road of reading silences and building trust. Many of the sources analyzed in this dissertation have never been used for academic research of any kind. As far as I am aware, none of the personal collections or any of the archives or files on Leatherdykes have ever been examined by a scholar for a published work. Yet newsletters, publications and ephemera on a wide range of topics appear in archives across the country, including the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, the Schlesinger Library at Harvard, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn New York, and the Iowa Women's History Archives at the University of Iowa. Throughout my research, I also developed contacts with a diverse array of individuals who contributed their personal stories, documents or memorabilia to the reconstruction of this important history. These sources, together with relevant theoretical and historical works contributed to my analysis of a number of important themes, including the dynamics of community development, the relationships between gay men and lesbians, and theories about gender, sex and sexuality. Not surprisingly,

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<sup>6</sup> Tony DeBlase, "Leather History Timeline," Leather Archives and Museum; Rob Bienvenu, "The Development of Sadoomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States," Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, 1998; Gayle Rubin, "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960 – 1990," Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1994; Pat Califia, "A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco," in Samois, *Coming to Power*, Alyson Publications, Boston, MA, 1987.

many women were reluctant to share their stories because of the highly emotional nature of the relationships involved, and the long term personal and professional impact of the Sex Wars on people's lives, and the fact that people can still be fired or have their children taken away for participating in SM activities. I am thus particularly grateful to the women who were brave enough to tell their stories and help reconstruct this history when the written records failed to offer enough detail or nuance.<sup>7</sup>

In thinking through these stories, the growing body of historical work focused on marginalized communities has heavily influenced my research methods. Nancy Hewitt's *Southern Discomfort* employs personal and organizational records as well as rare newspapers and pamphlets and oral history to uncover the lives and activism of women outside mainstream political and social movements. Likewise, though focused on a different set of marginalized people, George Chauncey in *Gay New York* and Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, offer creative models of how to gather information and sources on communities that were highly privatized and largely ignored. Both rely heavily on personal and court records as well as the alternative press in the case of the former and oral history in the latter. Joanne Meyerowitz in her recent history of transsexuality, *How Sex Changed*, offers another way of using a highly marginalized community to demonstrate the importance of the periphery in defining the center—and provides a good model for understanding how the history of sexuality speaks to broader trends in American culture and ideas. The creative methods that these authors

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<sup>7</sup> Readers will note that for the purposes of this dissertation's central arguments, oral histories were mainly used to given the author a sense of the times, rather than for data. These women's lives and stories will be included in a much more significant way as I rework this dissertation for publication. Also to be included in the revision of the project is the significant role of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the lives of many SM women, which is noticeably absent from many published sources but began to emerge in conversations with women. In both cases, I wanted to be sure I got the story right before attempting to represent them, and I will continue to work on both of these fronts until I think that I can effectively honor their truths.

wield to uncover the stories and reconstruct the voices of people who were meant to be forgotten suggest innumerable strategies for writing this history.<sup>8</sup>

While this project aims to restore and explain the history of the Leatherdyke community, it simultaneously explores and unpacks the dynamics and impact of community formation. It contributes to existing literatures about the gay and lesbian liberation and feminist communities, while also drawing important connections between the two. Surprisingly, none of the gay/lesbian histories previously outlined deal meaningfully with the connections between these movements. Some feminist histories outline pieces, but none deal specifically with the Leatherdyke community and its unique position and impact on both. Indeed, there is a growing and innovative body of literature on the history of the second wave of USAmerican feminism. One of the first studies, Sara Evans' *Personal Politics* skillfully connects the rise of the second wave to the civil rights movement, highlighting female anti-racist activists who became feminists as a result of their experiences of gender inequality in organizing for racial justice. Alice Echols' *Daring to be Bad* highlights another segment of second wave feminism in her exploration of radical feminism—outlining various positions and contestations within that part of the movement. More recently, there has been a revival in writing about the second wave with works that take a broader view. Ruth Rosen's *The World Split Open* not only provides a useful narrative but also skillfully demonstrates the profound impact the second wave had on USAmerican culture. In *The Other Women's Movement*, Dorothy Sue Cobble challenges the standard chronology of feminism by incorporating advocates

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change* (Lexington Books, 2002); Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); George Chauncy, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

of women's labor rights from the 1930s through the 1960s who anticipated the second wave. These times were long perceived as "the doldrums" by historians of feminism, but that image may now be reconsidered. Yet, as important as these histories are, they do not include coverage of communities of sex-positive feminists or feminists active much beyond the mid-1970s.<sup>9</sup>

Studies by a new generation of historians have further complicated our portrait of second wave feminism. My dissertation contributes to these important conversations by historians like Anne M. Valk and Anne Enke, both of whom have recently published monographs. Valk's *Radical Sisters* uncovers important connections between feminism and black liberation, highlighting both consensus and conflict, while underscoring the importance of geography and space in the cross-pollinations of these movements. Enke's *Finding the Movement* focuses on the centrality of space to the building of second wave feminism, challenging the primacy of identity as community builder. Both Valk and Enke emphasize the complicated, conflicted nature of the movement, challenging notions of a unified feminist identity, purpose or community.<sup>10</sup>

In contributing to these histories, this dissertation explores the importance of personal and political identity in community formation, delineating the ways in which identity is simultaneously a route to unity and group cohesion and to exclusion and division. Like Enke, this project makes clear the importance of space, both literal and figurative, in community creation and function while also showing how those places

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<sup>9</sup> Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Anne M. Valk, *Radical Sisters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2007).

could be sources of conflict and tension. The stories in Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6 highlight these moments of conflict as the feminist community is asked to make room for lesbians into SM while that same community is engaged in its own battles over who could participate. Lesbian SMers desired and at times demanded space in feminist venues such as publications, bookstores, conferences and meeting places and deeply resented being excluded. At the same time, some were willing to defame and/or exclude those feminists who objected to their sexual activities. Similarly, lesbian SMers depended on gay male culture for education and spaces for sexual encounters like fisting clubs, yet some were also deeply concerned about the inclusion of men, transfolk and bisexual women as they sought to maintain women-only safe space. By studying the development of this community across time, we can map the overlapping and at times contradictory nature of identity, space and community, while also tracing the process by which this community came into formation.

Sex, gender and sexuality are at the very core of this project. Thus, works by queer theorists and gender scholars focusing on the centrality of sex, sexuality and gender to the creation of the individual and society frame my dissertation. Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* underscores the social construction of both sex (considered biological) and gender (considered social), while also illustrating and analyzing the connections among language, gender, desire, society and sexuality. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam focuses on the intersection of sex and gender, which offers important clarity for understanding the complex sex/gender/sexuality of Leatherdykes. Les Feinberg calls into question the very existence of a binary gender model in his book, which is widely credited with sparking the newest wave of the

transliberation movement, adding both depth and breadth to understandings of the complexities of genders as played out in the Leatherdyke community. Foucault's discussion of the obsession of Western culture with sexuality as demonstrated through its insistence on repression rings particularly true when attempting to understand and analyze mainstream and marginalized responses to the Leatherdyke movement. Similarly, Eve Sedgwick's theories on and examples of the power of heteronormativity remind us that dominant structures have incredible influence over the private lives even of individuals who challenges their rules.<sup>11</sup> These theories and ideas both emerged from and helped me understand the debates and conflicts explored in this dissertation.

A decade before the emergence of queer theory and post-modernism, lesbian SMers were involved in theorizing sex and grappling with the complexity of sex/gender/sexuality. Their ideas and practices demonstrate that sexual identity and practice are both historically and socially mediated concepts. On the one hand, their experiences challenge ideas that sexuality is **only** a social construction in that many women reported desiring and engaging in SM sexual practices, before they knew what it was called or had an idea of what it meant. Others seem to have stumbled upon it as it became a viable sexual practice/identity. At the same time, this history also challenges the idea that identity is necessary for community cohesion—while these women were organizing as “SM”ers, they were not organizing as queers, yet they made space for both genderqueer and sexually queer practices. Meanwhile, the fact that SM was seen by non-SM feminists as inherently male and therefore suspect paved the way for the anti-trans

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998); Les Feinberg, *TransLiberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, (New York: Random House, 1978); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).



reaction of many lesbian feminists—showing the connections not only between anti-SM and anti-trans discourse, but also highlighting the historical specificity of gender and sexual identities. There were even those inside the SM movement who were anti-trans (some excluding transwomen, some rejecting transguys)—as part of defining their community. Interestingly, the historical records show that some groups were able to deal with such differences while other groups imploded over such issues. This fact speaks to different models for community building—those based on identity (or identity of one’s partner) and those built on shared desire or practice, rather than identity. This dissertation, then, maps out the complicated intersections of sex/gender/sexuality and identity/community and adds both depth and breadth to these ongoing discussions.

Lastly, this project shows how the issue of SM **became** a problem. Rather than assume that SM was necessarily problematic, this dissertation charts the early conversations and key turning points through which feminists, employing theory and practice, developed new ideas and identities around a specific set of sexual norms, and in turn, laid the foundation for the Sex Wars. The Sex Wars, in turn, shaped American culture for decades to come.

At the critical 1982 Barnard Conference discussed above, Gayle Rubin (at the time a graduate student at the University of Michigan) delivered a call to action, a clear response to the discourse of that particular historical moment, which remains powerful today.

The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality.

In large part, this dissertation explains not only why she spoke at Barnard, but also the history and historical implications of that important moment.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the organized lesbian sadomasochistic community entered into a protracted, heated and at times downright mean public discussion with anti-pornographers, now infamously referred to as the “Sex Wars.” Indeed, the lesbian SM community was formed largely in response to second wave anti-pornography feminists’ assertions about the nature of sex and sexuality. As with any war, there were two camps—which saw themselves diametrically philosophically opposed; there were attacks, both physical and verbal; there was propaganda and a breakdown in communication; and there were moments of diplomacy and the possibility for constructive debate and compromise. As one of the most national, public, frank discussions of sexuality, we can learn a lot about US American attitudes and assumptions from the “Sex Wars.” But the history of that conflict has not been fully told or contextualized because of the failure to incorporate the lives and ideas of lesbian SMers.

Feminists Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs summarize the second wave’s tumultuous relationship with sexuality in their 1982 *Ms.* article, “A Report on the Sex Crisis,” in which they highlight the campaign to understand and resist women’s oppression by attacking pornography. This new campaign, they argued, led to evolving questions and concerns about women’s sexuality mainly, “would we dare to assert a feminist eroticism of our own?” By 1980, they claim, “[i]n feminist journals as well as in this magazine, women insisted on exploring the varieties of their sexuality without being accused –by fundamentalists or feminists—of being perverse.” Nevertheless, there was a shared assumption by many feminists that certain practices

were categorically anti-feminist. The authors explain, “Few of us were prepared for the disclosure ... that some women were actually acting out the kind of fantasies that, according to the feminist consensus, were unthinkably off limits. One activist, Pat Califia, identified herself as a sado-masochist...”<sup>12</sup>

Reading almost any history of second wave feminism, one is led to believe that *this* is how the Sex Wars started.<sup>13</sup> The article suggests it was Pat Califia’s announcement that she was a (self-identified) lesbian-feminist sado-masochist that was the proverbial shot over the bow, the first attack (albeit, as we shall see, from Califia’s perspective a defensive one) in what would become the Sex Wars. Other general histories of the second wave cite the Barnard Feminist and the Scholar IX conference as the zenith of the sex wars.<sup>14</sup> However varied these accounts of the movements may be, and whether or not Califia’s article or the Barnard conference initiated the war, tensions had been running high on all sides of the sex debate for over a decade. In fact, the historical record details a much more complex picture than the simplified pro and con sides that most historians, even feminist historians, have articulated. Indeed, there was a long and in-depth discussion within the feminist community regarding sado-masochism for many years before Califia’s apparently shocking 1980 tell-all and the explosive Barnard conference two years later. This dissertation provides that history.

It is not often that historians of any stripe are able to pinpoint the exact moment of genesis for anything, nevermind the creation of a new form of sexuality. That sexuality

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, “A Report on the Sex Crisis,” *Ms. Magazine*, March, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> In 1982, these feminists call it a Crisis—apparently, the debate had not yet reached War status.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall & Linda Gordon, Eds. *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter. *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Alice Echols. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open* (New York: Viking, 2000).

even has a history of its own is a relatively new concept, one that is still often met with doubt or condescension. Thus, many historians of sexuality regularly face assumptions that their work, albeit interesting or perhaps titillating, is a trivial endeavor in world of “real” academics. Yet sexuality and its complex, complicated and often fascinating history can be more than an interesting sidebar to “real” history—it can, in fact, expose many of the deeper streams of ideas and assumptions that shape people, culture, laws and society.

Thinking about American ideas about sexuality can, for example, highlight the tensions of American liberalism. In the debates over pornography and SM highlighted in this dissertation, we see the ongoing conflict between individual freedom of expression and the right to protection from harm. In this study, we also see the core struggle between majority rule and minority rights, as non-normative sexualities, whether they be gay or SM or both, face political and social repression at the hands of the sexual majority, under the auspices of not only conservative right-wing family values, but radical feminism as well. As these different theories matured, the “Culture Wars” of the 1980s and beyond have led to a heightened state of concern around sexuality. Whether it be in the form of debates around gays in the military, abstinence-only education, abortion accessibility and funding, marriage rights or the most recent panic over sexting, there has been a heightened sense of urgency to public discourses around sexuality. Yet, at the same time, there are deep-seated taboos around open and honest discussion of sexuality, which is often seen as pornographic instead of educational or philosophical, and the overarching cultural message is that sexuality is something that needs to be channeled, curtailed and controlled.

Indeed, as Gayle Rubin exhorted in 1982, “the time has come to think about sex,” not only to think about it, but to talk and write about it as well—particularly since once again “people are ... becom[ing] dangerously crazy about sexuality.” As we all know, many of the debates, questions, issues and problems that led to the “Sex Wars” are still unresolved. While much has changed, most USAmericans are still unable to speak openly and honestly about sexuality. They remain uncertain of what honest talk about sexuality would look like or are simply afraid to embrace difference and address the complexity of sexualities. Sexuality, in all its forms, is still taboo in our society, and there is, of course, a particular disdain for any form of sexuality that does not conform to the idealized heterosexual monogamous norm. Each of the readers of this dissertation could wax eloquently about the silences and assumptions surrounding sexuality, their own or others. Perhaps learning from our history and opening an honest, thorough investigation of the assumptions surrounding the current status of sex and sexuality in the world can help us all find a way forward. Yes, the time has come, again, to talk about sex and let us do so without fear or shame.

At the height of the “Sex Wars,” Dorothy Allison promised,

...someday to provide a gathering place where in a center of the room will stand a huge, open book, a book where women will write out their fearful secrets and sign them or not as they choose. The only requirement will be that they should not feel they have to lie.<sup>15</sup>

I like to think of this dissertation as part of Allison’s book, where one of the truths about the history of sexuality and its impact on individuals, communities and culture is finally being told.

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<sup>15</sup> Allison, Dorothy. “Public Silence, Private Terror,” *Pleasure and Danger* (New York: Routledge and Kegan, 1984).

## Chapter One

The “Razor’s Edge” of Feminist Boundaries:  
The evolution of feminist sexual ideology and the problem of SM  
1969-1977

“Few of us were prepared for the disclosure ... that some women were actually acting out the kind of fantasies that ... were unthinkable off limits.”<sup>1</sup>

Ms. Magazine, 1982

This chapter charts the evolution of Second Wave feminist sexual theory during the 1970s, a decade before the Sex Wars, and argues that this evolution was powerfully shaped by debates among feminists about lesbian sado-masochism.<sup>2</sup> Some of these “pre-war” exchanges elucidate philosophical questions, many left unanswered; others explore theoretical ideas regarding the natures and intersections of feminism, sexuality, patriarchy, violence and consent. These debates illustrate how feminists’ ideas about sexuality formed and changed in response to critiques from other feminists. Emerging issues such as domestic violence (at the time known as battered women), rape and pornography along with disagreements within the feminist community led to a deepened, more refined analysis of sexuality. Taken together, this complex set of questions and theories served to harden lines of opposition between feminists which, in turn, became central dividing lines in the Sex Wars. The Sex Wars of the 1980s did not erupt sin

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, “A Report on the Sex Crisis,” Ms. Magazine, March, 1982, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> I should note here that by feminists I am referring to women who either explicitly or implicitly (by association with a group or employment with a particular periodical) align themselves with feminism.

genesis but were the historical product of protracted debates within the feminist community during the previous decade. Feminist sexual ideology evolved to incorporate theories of power, violence and consent as a direct result of the issue of lesbian sadomasochism.

Debate and conflict regarding the importance of sex to feminists, as well as the definitions and boundaries of feminist sexuality, emerged in the very early years of the second wave, though initially most feminist theorists assumed that heterosexual sex was oppressive to women. Anne Koedt's groundbreaking manifesto "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," first published in 1969, argued that women's sexuality historically had centered on vaginal orgasm for the purposes of male pleasure and control. In doing so she "made the earliest and most explicit connection between the institution of heterosexuality and women's oppression."<sup>3</sup> Published the next year and equally influential was Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in which she delineated "a power imbalance not only in gender but also in sexuality" and made the case that "sexual self-determination for women ... was critical to women's empowerment."<sup>4</sup> That same year the Boston Women's Health Collective published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a woman-centered compendium that included a variety of information regarding women's health, including their sexuality. The volume engaged topics such as such as lesbianism, birth control and masturbation, as well as menstruation, body image and pregnancy. In 1971, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which reinforced the idea that sexual liberation was central to women's equality, made its U.S. publishing debut. In it, Greer contended that "the female is considered a sexual object

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," Mary Orován Papers, Schlesinger Library at Harvard, p. 1-5; Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 211.

<sup>4</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 263.

for the use and appreciation of other sexual beings, men.”<sup>5</sup> That same year the First National Chicana Conference produced a series of resolutions, many of which directly addressed women’s lack of access to sexual information and their broader sexual oppression.<sup>6</sup> From theorists to organizations, many early advocates of women’s liberation agreed that sexual subordination was deeply linked to women’s political, social and cultural oppression.

Most Second Wave feminists also agreed that sex mattered. But why and how it mattered deeply divided them. For some, sex was necessarily oppressive; it was something from which women needed protection. Others insisted that sexuality constituted a crucial site for women’s liberation. Koedt, for example, positioned herself squarely as a liberationist, contending that the “establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Redstockings, one of the earliest radical feminist groups in New York City, originally held that sex between men and women was natural and desired. Indeed they argued that sexuality was a weapon that women could use to coerce men into treating them as equals. Despite these feminists’ passionate claims that sexual liberation would lead to cultural liberation, there were other feminists who saw sex as peripheral or distracting women from more critical struggles. Indeed, some Redstockings rethought their initial claims and soon contended that “heterosexual desire was nothing more than a fabrication designed to keep women enslaved to men,” and as such, “the goal was to wean women from debilitating relationships with men.” Similarly, Cell 16, a radical feminist group organizing in Boston, Massachusetts, took a decidedly anti-sex and pro-celibacy position. Dana

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<sup>5</sup> Germaine Greer. *The Female Eunuch* (Bantam Books, 1970), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, Eds., *Dear Sisters* (Basic Books, 2000), 120 & 166.

<sup>7</sup> Koedt, p. 5; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, (Penguin, 2006), 150.



Densmore, one of the most widely published members, asserted that sex was “inconvenient, time-consuming, energy-draining and irrelevant.” Shortly thereafter Roxanne Dunbar, a regular contributor to the group’s publication No More Fun and Games, “called for liberation from sex,” arguing that “sexuality as the source of human liberation must be questioned.” Another argued a few years later, “the real issue is simply that women *don’t* like [sex] either with the same frequency or in the same way as men” and asserted that “the male’s greater need for sex is the reason for their oppression of women.”<sup>8</sup>

Other feminists also embraced the idea that sex was anti-feminist. The Feminists, a radical New York based group, had several outspoken members who made their position abundantly clear. Ti-Grace Atkinson, the group’s unofficial leader, argued that “*all* sex is reactionary, and that feminism is revolutionary.” She added, “In a free society you cannot have the family, marriage, sex, or love.” Indeed, one veteran activist recalled Atkinson “saying that [sexual desire] was all in my head.” Others in the group maintained this view of sex as problematic even after Atkinson left, contending that “aside from rape, prostitution and marriage, sex is just not all that important.” Accordingly, “feminists must strive to love each other and not be confused with the distractions that sex offers.”<sup>9</sup>

However anti-sex these particular activists were, historian Alice Echols makes clear in her 1989 study that “it is important to note that this was not the position typically taken by radical feminists.” Rather, she explains, that most developed a critique of the

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<sup>8</sup> Dana Densmore, “On Celibacy,” *No More Fun and Games*, 1 (1969): no page number, Schlesinger library at Harvard; Roxanne Dunbar, “‘Sexual Liberation’: More of the Same Thing” *No More Fun and Games*, 3 (Nov 1969): 49, Schlesinger Library at Harvard; Abby Rockefeller, “Sex: The Basis of Sexism,” *No More Fun and Games*, 6 (May 1973): 34, Schlesinger library at Harvard.

<sup>9</sup> Echols, 164; Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Vaginal Orgasm as a Mass Hysterical Survival Response,” p. 2, 1968, Mary Orován Papers, Schlesinger Library at Harvard, also see Atkinson, “The Institution of Sexual Intercourse,” p. 1-7, date unknown, Mary Orován Papers, Schlesinger Library at Harvard.

sexual revolution as based on male ideas, wants and needs and “tended to ignore the ways in which the sexual revolution expanded women’s sexual horizon and instead focused on the increased sexual exploitation that accompanied it.” Yet, they did not then assume the solution was to deny women’s sexuality; rather “they were convinced that the repression of female desire was central to women’s oppression, and sexual liberation essential to women’s liberation.”<sup>10</sup>

Among those who claimed that sexuality was important to the fight for women’s liberation, lesbianism quickly became a central issue. Betty Friedan set the split between lesbian and straight feminists in motion with her now infamous comment that lesbians were a “lavender menace.”<sup>11</sup> Her claims inspired lesbians to speak out against ongoing discrimination even as they were being purged from some local and national chapters of NOW and other feminist groups. Amid the uproar, sexuality literally took center stage at the second Congress to Unite Women. Radicalesbians took over the stage on opening night to highlight the oppression of lesbians within the women’s movement. Wearing lavender t-shirts emblazoned with “Lavender Menace,” the women demanded that the

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<sup>10</sup> Echols, 174 and 182, see also Sheila Cronan, “Fuck Marriage Not Men,” p. 1-8, no date, Mary Orován Papers, Schlesinger Library at Harvard and Sheila Michaels, “The Archetypal Woman,” p. 1-4, date unknown, Mary Orován Papers, Schlesinger Library at Harvard.

<sup>11</sup> Echols, 212 and 345. D’Emilio and Freedman, 316; Rosen, 167-168; Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 137. There is a lot of confusion over whether or not Friedan called lesbians a “menace” or a herring. Most versions of the story report that that Friedan called lesbians a “lavender menace” (see Echols, Rosen, Jay) but D’Emilio & Freedman quote Robin Morgan as the comment being “herring.” Echols, however, explains this confusion in *Daring*—indicating that Friedan called certain militant lesbians a “menace” and Susan Brownmiller countered saying that perhaps the militant lesbians could be considered a “herring.” Despite the confusion over the terms and the fact that they seemed to be speaking specifically about militant lesbians, the historical significance of Friedan’s alleged demonization of lesbians in general is indisputable. Of course, there are numerous other examples of lesbians writing of discrimination within the movement, for one example, see “It Just Happened” in *Dear Sisters*, pp. 167.

Congress address their issues, which resulted in a set of resolutions and a position paper defining lesbianism and its relation to feminism.<sup>12</sup>

This action and the controversy that led to this demonstration spurred the movement in two different, though interrelated, directions: lesbian supremacy and heterosexual withdrawal. In the first case, a number of women moved embraced lesbianism and the idea that the supreme manifestation of one's feminism was to be (or become for the purposes of supporting one's politics) a lesbian. Indeed, even Atkinson boldly revised her earlier analysis that sex was a distraction from true revolution, asserting in 1971 that "feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice."<sup>13</sup> These developments led some heterosexual activists to distance themselves from feminist organizations, either out of homophobic fear or because they felt marginalized and/or discriminated against by lesbians.<sup>14</sup> Many feminists, however, simply continued to debate issues of sexuality as self-identified lesbians became increasingly visible in the movement and in society at large.

Of course not all matters of "feminist" sexuality were directly related to actual sex acts. In 1973, feminists across the nation celebrated when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Roe v. Wade*, ensuring a woman's right to privately decide to terminate a pregnancy. This landmark ruling came as a culmination of years of feminist activism proclaiming women's right to control their own bodies whether related to pregnancy, motherhood or consensual sex. Speakouts on rape and domestic violence also addressed issues of sexual power though in these cases sex was uniformly viewed as something wielded by men against women.

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<sup>12</sup> Echols, 210-215.

<sup>13</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, Chicago Women's Liberation Union pamphlet, *Lesbianism and Feminism*, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Echols, 215-240; D'Emilio and Freedman, 316-318; Rosen, 169-175.

With sexuality a central issue for discussion and debate among Second Wave of feminists, it is not surprising that the conversation expanded to include not only whether a feminist should have sex and with whom but also *how* she should have sex. Among sexual-liberationists, numerous debates developed regarding which sexual practices might be liberatory versus which might recreate or reinforce women's oppression. It is at the intersection of these numerous debates, that the most controversial feminist sexual practice emerged—lesbian sado-masochism—appeared and, with it, the beginning of the core disagreement among those involved in the Sex Wars of the 1980s.

Even before debates over lesbian sado-masochism erupted among feminists, a number had theorized about the problems of sado-masochism. Cell 16 author Roxanne Dunbar wrote in 1969 that “sexual ‘pleasure’ is equal to power and dominance for the man,” and that even when in pornography females are dominant, it is “part of the masculine ideology of power.”<sup>15</sup> Kate Millet made similar connections in *Sexual Politics*, arguing that “patriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality ... The rule here associates sadism with the male ... and victimization with the female.”<sup>16</sup> In her 1974 book *Woman Hating*, Andrea Dworkin included a feminist examination of the *Story of O*, a controversial novel about a sadistic man and his female erotic slave, to demonstrate male hatred of women. She declared: “Sex as the power dynamic between men and women, its primary form sadomasochism, is what we know now.”<sup>17</sup> It is clear

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<sup>15</sup> Roxanne Dunbar, “‘Sexual Liberation’ : More of the Same Thing” *No More Fun and Games*, 3 (November 1969): p. 53, Schlesinger library at Harvard; Cell 16 member Dana Densmore articulated similar opinions, see also, “On Masochism” *No More Fun and Games*, 6 (May 1973): p. 100-113, Schlesinger library at Harvard.

<sup>16</sup> Kate Millet. *Sexual Politics*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Dworkin. *Woman Hating*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), 55-63, 183. As a related side note, dominance and submission are not the only sado-masochistic images used by feminists to describe the heterosexual experience. Indeed, in the first issue of Ms. magazine, published in late 1971, showed a couple bound together with a long rope; the photo, meant to accompany the article regarding writing one's

that by 1974, there was a growing consensus among leading feminists that not only was sex oppressive to women, but also that male sexuality was inherently sadistic and women were their sexual victims, having been forced into masochism.<sup>18</sup> These claims set the stage for passionate disagreements when other feminists began to discuss and even publicly advocate for lesbian-feminist sado-masochism.

The initial second wave feminist discussions of lesbian sado-masochism emerged into print with the publication of “The Spirit is Feminist but the flesh is?,” by Karla Jay, a prolific lesbian activist.<sup>19</sup> Published in the Lesbian Tide in October 1974, Jay suggests that the issue was not a new one. Indeed, in her opening paragraph, she claims, “I’ve seen countless sisters rant against any sort of sexual inequality in a lesbian relationship only to hear later that their favorite sexual ‘sport’ is sado-masochism.”<sup>20</sup> Jay’s matter-of-fact statement does not seem intended to shock anyone by disclosing that there are lesbians who engage in sado-masochistic activity, and the lack of response to the article indicates that readers were not outraged. Apparently, by 1974 lesbian sado-masochistic

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own marriage contract a la Lucy Stone, had been considered for the cover, but was eventually relegated to an inside illustration. See Mary Thom, *Inside Ms.* (New York: Henry Colt & Co., 1997), 16 & photo following page 52.

<sup>18</sup> The Redstockings Manifesto, published in 1969, addressed the issue differently, in terms of dominance and submission, but still the central message is similar: “Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. ... men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest ... Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and back up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position.” However, they also made clear their position on women and where responsibility for change lies. “We also reject the idea that women consent to or are to blame for their own oppression. Women’s submission is not the result of brainwashing, stupidity, or mental illness, but of continual, daily pressure from men. We do not need to change ourselves, but to change men.” Redstockings, “Manifesto,” in *Dear Sisters*, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, page 12, there is one earlier published piece in which a woman discusses SM, but given the content of the article (in which she expresses reservations about dominating other women) and the fact that, while the interviewee may hold feminist opinions, the discussion is not an analysis of SM from a feminist perspective, therefore, I assert that Jay’s 1974 piece is the first published discussion of SM through a feminist lens.

<sup>20</sup> Karla Jay, “The Spirit is Feminist but the flesh is?” *Lesbian Tide*, (Oct 1974): p. 1, Vertical Files “Sexuality-S/M,” Lesbian Herstory Archives.

practice was something that was known, if not widely discussed, tolerated, accepted or embraced.<sup>21</sup>

Jay clearly delineates the problem of lesbian S/M as striking a deep chord, challenging values and demanding further investigation. Concerned that “despite our so-called ‘liberation’ we all probably still have some hang-ups about sex,” Jay contended that lesbians had constructed their own “set of taboos.” They included SM and other “deviant” practices, such as dildo use and prostitution. She theorized that the problem was not a simple dichotomy between one’s desires and socially-accepted norms, but rather a question of whether one should or could control one’s sexual fantasies. She quipped, “As much as I liberate myself, my body won’t listen to my intellectual appeals.” Personally, she recognized that guilt about “politically incorrect” fantasies could be a problem but thought it could be assuaged by acknowledging one’s desires and acting as one’s “consciousness dictates.” However, Jay pointed out, some lesbians believe that, as part of their self-realization, they should act out their fantasies in order to challenge a sexual status quo that denied female desire. So if a lesbian had sado-masochistic fantasies, Jay argued, her response to this philosophical Catch-22 would be based on which of her beliefs are strongest (i.e. equality vs. masochism), her access to SM, and her local lesbian community’s response to her SM desires.<sup>22</sup>

Having outlined the problem, however, Jay admitted that she did not yet know how to resolve the conflicts between competing ideals and values of fantasy, desire, self-

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<sup>21</sup> Perhaps there was no response because after January of 1975, the *Tide* suspended publication for a few months. However, given the rapidity of the response to later articles regarding lesbian S-M, it seems likely that such responses would have been received in time for and printed by the January 1975 publication and/or would have been printed when the publication resumed. Neither was the case. See *Lesbian Tide* October 1974-October 1975.

<sup>22</sup> Jay, “Spirit,” 15.

actualization, and anti-oppression. She did, however, think that “bringing the problem to the surface and raising the general consciousness that such a political/sexual gap exists are the first steps in finding an answer.” Calling for an open and honest discussion of issues regarding sexuality in general and SM in particular, Jay cautioned,

Equally important is a recognition of the struggle we and our sisters are going through in this area, and also a recognition that what is closest to our deepest selves is hardest to change. (It was not an accident that gay liberation was the last movement to surface, for isn't sexual oppression what lies closest to the soul?) And along with this recognition must come a certain tolerance towards others and ourselves in our struggle to change—for the road towards liberation of our deepest selves is hard and long and I suspect that the ultimate definition of what sexist, right or wrong may be as fine as a razor's edge.

Here, Jay not only explicitly connects sexuality to one's soul, but sexual freedom to the liberation agenda. In likening it to a razor's edge, she concluded that the line between right and wrong (or feminist and anti-feminist) will not only be hard to discern but also dangerous, and potentially painful, to touch. In doing so, she prophesied the difficult years to come. At the same time, Jay takes some very particular stances on women's sexuality: that women are sexual beings and that some women's sexuality, whether innate or socialized, involves sadism and/or masochism; that sexual liberation is and should be part of the feminist agenda; and that what is needed for feminism's survival and growth is not a clear demarcation of right and wrong, but rather acceptance of a range of possibilities.<sup>23</sup>

Jay's article was both a bold confession of the secret of lesbian sadomasochism and a response to ongoing, though unpublished, conversations among feminists. For example, her position on these matters was in stark opposition to assertions made by Ti-Grace Atkinson's only a few months later at a 1975 meeting of The Eulenspiegel Society

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<sup>23</sup> Jay, *Spirit*, 15-33.

(a largely heterosexual SM liberation group formed in 1971).<sup>24</sup> While Atkinson assumed that lesbians were not involved in sado-masochism and assumed the heterosexuality of her audience, her perspectives on SM *as a feminist* are relevant to the emerging discussion. Later widely reprinted under the title, “Why I’m Against S/M Liberation,” Atkinson disagreed with almost every one of Jay’s assumptions. Explaining that liberation has two meanings, either “freeing of one party from possession by another party” or “looting,” she critiqued the S/M claim to a liberationist agenda because such activities made participants part of the system, rather than destroying or fundamentally changing it. Atkinson then explained the difference between S/M and her version of feminism: “[Feminists’] enemy is the Establishment—its laws and institutions. S/M not only does not share a common enemy with us but longs to be recognized as part of the essence of the power structure that *is* our enemy.” Here Atkinson articulated a commonly held feminist assumption that power *itself* was the problem—that power was inherently abusive and oppressive and thus, women’s liberation necessitated both the erasure and evacuation of power.

Moving more specifically into the realm of S/M, Atkinson claimed over and over that one cannot be both feminist and pro-S/M; indeed, she asserted that feminists have distinctly different priorities than SMers: “Feminists are on the fence, at the moment, on the issue of sex. But I do not know any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex. She’d choose freedom every time.” In addition to different priorities, Atkinson argued, “By no stretch of the imagination is the Women’s Movement a movement for sexual liberation.” She both outlined the debate

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<sup>24</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Why I’m Against S/M Liberation,” Majority Report Newmagazine, September 1977, p. 17; “About TES,” <http://tes.org/main/about.php>, accessed October 23, 2010.



in the feminist movement regarding sexual liberation and positioned herself squarely in opposition to Jay and other feminists who claimed that sexual liberation was critical for women's equality. At the same time, Atkinson elucidated yet another widely held belief that feminism, a movement for women's liberation, and sado-masochism were inherently antithetical and irreconcilable.<sup>25</sup> These claims, which were also voiced by Millett and Dworkin, would become even more deeply engrained in feminist theorizing as yet the issue of rape took center stage in feminist circles.

Just as the debate about SM as a feminist issue was beginning to take hold, rape emerged as a central concern in feminist theorizing and organizing. In 1975, Susan Brownmiller published her groundbreaking treatise, *Against Our Will*, which shook the feminist world by claiming rape as a crime of power rather than lust. As part of this analysis Brownmiller made her now-famous assertion that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear."<sup>26</sup> Historian Ruth Rosen explained it best,

*Against Our Will* revealed the universality of rape—of women, children, and prisoners in war, in peace, at home, on the streets, in the country, in the city, in every part of the world, in all periods of history. Brownmiller's exhaustive book put rape onto the political agenda even as it raised new questions about white feminists understanding of race and racism.<sup>27</sup>

Over the next few years, rape-crisis centers and anti-rape advocacy organizations sprang up across the country. Clearly a widely read and deeply influential study, *Against Our*

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<sup>25</sup> Atkinson, "Why I'm Against SM," p. 17. That Atkinson does not reference lesbian SM is particularly interesting, given the fact that later in the Sex Wars, Atkinson's article is printed and re-printed as ammunition against lesbian-SM. This same article was later widely reprinted in *Against Sado-masochism*. Additionally, this is a clear example of the fact that the ongoing debate over whether sexual liberation is or should be part of the feminist agenda had not yet been settled by 1975, and Atkinson's own trajectory illuminates the difficulties of charting a clear path. She was decidedly anti-sex at the beginning of her feminist career, later proclaimed that lesbianism was the practice of feminist theory, and here, in 1975, argues that sexual liberation is not central to women's equality.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Rosen, 182.

*Will* launched Brownmiller's career as a spokeswoman for feminism. It also revealed her views regarding sado-masochism in general and lesbian SM in particular.

In her characteristically straight-forward manner, Brownmiller explained that

[h]ardly by accident, sadomasochism has always been defined by male and female terms. It has been codified by those who see in sadism a twisted understanding of their manhood, and it has been accepted by those who see in masochism the abuse and pain that is synonymous with Woman. For this reason alone, sadomasochism shall always remain a reactionary antithesis to women's liberation.<sup>28</sup>

In this brief three-sentence statement, the celebrated author takes a stand on several key issues in the debate. By asserting that SM is always defined in oppositional male/female terms, she explicitly locates S/M inside the institution of heterosexuality. Brownmiller then asserted that sexuality could not be both authentically non-sexist and sado-masochistic, and simultaneously placed sado-masochism in opposition to women's liberation. In several ways, then, she not only echoed Atkinson's assumptions, she also created a theoretical link between sado-masochism, rape and other forms of violence against women, and in doing so foreshadowed many hard-line feminist criticisms of lesbian sado-masochism to come. Atkinson and Brownmiller not only presaged coming critiques of lesbian SM, they also reiterated and built upon beliefs about male/female sexuality professed by a variety of second wave feminists. These activists regularly equated men, and by extension male sexuality, with dominance and/or sadism and women, and by extension female sexuality, with submission and/or masochism. Those who accepted such views concluded that S/M and feminism were not just strange bedfellows, but a theoretical impossibility.

Yet, there were those who did see lesbian sado-masochism as a viable feminist practice and sought to counter the growing assumption that feminism and S/M were

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<sup>28</sup> Brownmiller, 292.

inherently opposed. The first published account by self-identified lesbian-feminist sado-masochist Barbara Ruth (aka Barbara Lipschutz, aka Drivenwoman), was “CATHEXIS (on the nature of S&M),” printed in the feminist journal *Hera* in spring 1975. Of course Ruth was not the first lesbian to practice sado-masochistic behaviors, nor, as we have seen, was she the first feminist to discuss sexual activity as a possible site for liberation. However, she was the first to bring all of these pieces into conversation in a public, published context. In doing so, Ruth analyzed lesbian S/M through a feminist lens, alternately challenging and reinforcing previously articulated feminist assumptions.<sup>29</sup>

In opening her discussion, Ruth carefully delineated that SM as a liberatory sexual practice “is only possible for women within a lesbian-feminist context.” She contended further, “As a lesbian-feminist, I believe it would be extremely self-destructive for any woman to play *either* role in an S&M relationship with any man ... Such an action would be *perversion* of masochism and counter-revolutionary.” This declaration not only marks the ratcheting up of a long debate within the feminist community but also an important moment in the history of sexuality—the first published explanation of this new form of sexuality, one based not only on bodily desire, but framed as a political project as well. Yet, Ruth goes beyond a simple explanation of the practice to make the case that not only are feminism and S/M not inherently opposed, but that they are completely compatible and that S/M could be a venue for women’s liberation. To make her point absolutely clear, she asked, “How can I be a lesbian-feminist and be involved in S&M?”

Her answers began,

In all human dynamics there is a hidden agenda which plays a major, though unrecognized role. But in an overt S&M relationship the hidden agenda is made

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Ruth, “Cathexis,” *Lesbian Tide*, (May/June, 1977). This article was reprinted in the *Lesbian Tide* but the original was in *Hera*, Vol. 1, No. 5, (December, 1975).

manifest; both parties agree to a power which is contracted and explicit... At last, we are making our own rituals, scripting as well as starring in them.

The question, she argued is not whether or not lesbians *can* be sado-masochists in a feminist context, but rather “now that we have withdrawn power over our sexuality from the man, are we secure enough to play with it, to explore amongst ourselves parameters’ of dominance and submission?” While it is important to note that Ruth believed that lesbian sado-masochism was different because it involved women reclaiming their own power, she simultaneously departed from the dominant feminist belief that power itself was the problem. Ruth theorized instead that power is something that could be scripted and played with.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed power and trust, rather than sexuality and pain, were central to Ruth’s analysis of the S/M relationship, and stood as the bedrock upon which she built her case for a feminist lesbian sado-masochism.

S&M is not rape. (Indeed, the S&M bond is built on consent. If the S overpowers the M, it is because it is the M’s stated wish to be overpowered, to surrender herself in a situation of complete safety. The S is the antithesis of the rapist, in that she is totally caught up in her partner’s pleasure. Also, among lesbian-feminists, she has probably herself experienced the role of M, and therefore can identify with it. Men rape women to express their hatred of us. The S makes love to the M, because she loves and identifies with her.)

While Ruth made a strong case for why lesbian sado-masochism is different than heterosexual rape, she did so by employing arguments that echo the assumptions of anti-S/M feminists. Her claim that lesbian sadists are solely interested in their partner’s pleasure, while perhaps building on understandings of butch-femme sexuality, accepted an essentialist view of gender by implying that women are inherently concerned with others’ pleasure. In asserting that men rape women to demonstrate their hatred, Ruth not

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth, 10.

only recapitulated Brownmiller's argument, but simultaneously essentialized the sexual nature and practices of (heterosexual) men and women.<sup>31</sup> Thus Ruth aligned herself with a common feminist discourse—contrasting women's care and sensibility with men's brutality and insensitivity. Yet, unlike Atkinson, Brownmiller and others, Ruth employed these assumptions in support of feminist lesbian SM practices.

As part and parcel of this broader argument, Ruth also addressed other issues related to lesbian S/M that would speak directly to her audience, namely the desire for sexual pleasure and the discrimination one faced in pursuit of it. Ruth explicitly referenced one feminist critique of heterosexual sex—that men were wholly uninterested in women's pleasure and that, in turn, female partners often faked orgasm. Ruth contended, she could not “imagine a faked orgasm with the context of an explicit S&M relationship; the pair are in much too close communication to permit such deceit.” Here, Ruth assured her readers that, unlike unsatisfying, disconnected heterosexual sex, lesbian SM was intimate and pleasurable. At the same time, she compared the oppression of sado-masochists to that of homosexuals as she theorized that “S&M is like homosexuality, in that those bothered by it find it necessary to find out what caused it.” A direct reference to the homophobia that lesbians faced in society, the comment could also be a veiled allusion to the continued discrimination against lesbians inside the feminist movement. Either way, Ruth connected the “deviant” status of homosexual sex with S/M in an attempt to gain sympathy from her largely lesbian audience, for whom homophobia was an emotional issue that might trigger sympathy for other kinds of sexual oppression.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ruth, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ruth, 10.

Ruth concluded her argument by claiming that SM between lesbians is always an act of unmitigated love and identification. The remainder of the article then addressed lesbians' concerns about exploring these practices:

Many lesbian-feminists try to exorcise their S&M desires, because they are ashamed of and frightened of them. There is another alternative. It requires trust and courage. Your body will tell you whether or not you are turned on by S&M... Playing with S-M, exploring what gives you pleasure is not a lifelong commitment ... Almost nothing is "known" about female sexuality—don't declare the research over before all the data is in. Will you deny your sisters or yourself crescendos of rapture because liberated women aren't supposed to like it that way?

Ruth challenged fellow lesbian-feminists to trust themselves, while underlining the ubiquitous feminist critique about the dearth of information regarding women's sexuality. In response to that vacuum, Ruth called for community action to support sexual explorations: "Why not a coven, a support group, a sisterhood, to explore, nonjudgementally, the dimensions of ecstasy?"<sup>33</sup> Here, she not only joined Jay's earlier call to open discussions of women's sexuality as part of feminist practice but also challenged other feminists to allow themselves (and others) pleasure even if they "aren't supposed to like it that way."

While it would be a few years before Ruth's vision of a lesbian-feminist SM support group materialized, there were further discussions of sado-masochism inside the lesbian-feminist community in 1976, and some important new themes emerged. The centrality of power and trust to S/M were underscored, while the S/M "coming out"/closet narrative and the idea that S/M could be therapeutic developed in ongoing discussions of lesbian SM.

The "coming out" narrative regarding sado-masochistic fantasies, desires and activities was a potent intervention for many. Like lesbians, who had long kept silent

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<sup>33</sup> Ruth, 10-11.

about their desires for fear of rejection, SM practitioners now sought solidarity through public witnessing. In Barbara Ruth's second article "Coming Out on S&M," she described embracing her sexual desires, "When I was eight years old I was masturbatory, lesbian and sado-masochistic. Subsequently, because of my feelings of guilt, I renounced all three." With the rise of women's liberation, however, "I learned to affirm my feelings of self-love and woman-love ..." Yet, she continued, "I'm still in the closet on S-M. I have admitted that I *used* to be into it, but said that 'those feelings' ... were aroused only with men and attributed the whole thing to what I call my 'lousy heterosexual instincts.' ...I have not 'come out' on S-M."<sup>34</sup> Ruth had reason to hesitate about coming out since lesbian sado-masochism, though gaining some traction in debate, was not something that was widely discussed or accepted. An article from the Gay Community News published at approximately the same time underscored this lack of openness, and verified that lesbian sado-masochists *did* exist:

S&M transcends gender and gender-preference. Yes, even lesbians are into it. But talk about closets! In our entire culture, on the gay male subculture is 'out' about S&M, and you have to know the bars, know the dress code and the language to find a partner ... The straights have clubs and magazines, but the lesbians are silent. Except for those fleeting and unrecorded bar conversations ...<sup>35</sup>

The secrecy and shame associated with lesbian S/M was clearly established and was directly linked to the politics of feminism, which had been coded as diametrically oppositional to S/M.

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<sup>34</sup> Barbara Lipscutz, (aka Drivenwoman). "Coming Out on S&M" *Journal of Radical Therapy, Vol 5* (Spring 1976): 8. In fact, when Barbara Lipscutz (later Ruth) originally sent her article to Radical Therapy she was not out and therefore had asked the editors "to print it under the pseudonym [sic], 'Drivenwoman,'" a request she quickly revoked after she had "come out" as a sado-masochist to her local community.

<sup>35</sup> Rosenjoy. "Sado-Masochism: The Theory and the Practice," *Gay Community News*, (February 7, 1976): 10. This article is confusing in that while the by-line is attributed to Rosenjoy, the author seems to be transcribing a conversation between feminists regarding lesbian sado-masochism. Whether or not these feminists and their dialogue are real or creations of the author is unclear.

Condemned by their feminist sisters, they nonetheless saw their interest or participation in SM *as* a feminist activity. In the Gay Community News, Helga agreed with Ruth's assessment of the potential of SM to change women's relationship to power. She wondered, "Why shouldn't they use power in an S&M way where both partners have control, picking the side they want to be on, not having chosen for them by biological definition?" Another woman, Rosa, explained, "We have to start liberation in the bedroom in the relationships between people. Of course, that's feminist."<sup>36</sup> Echoing Ruth's earlier contention that SM could be a liberatory practice, Helga and Rosa asserted that, rather than reinforcing power hierarchies, SM illuminated power and also helped participants locate their own personal power. In particular, participating in SM helped women to understand the dynamics of authority and submission in a unique way. As Barbara Ruth declared, "When you hold my hands 'powerless', when you bring me to orgasm 'against my will', I am learning things about power and will that I never knew before."<sup>37</sup> Helga also drew on this theme: "S&M is a game people play called 'who's got the power.' It's a game because there are two sides (the sadist and the masochist), but it's a win-win since both should end up with an equal amount of the power, and with sexual satisfaction."<sup>38</sup>

Another significant addition to the conversation about the possibility for feminist SM was these women's collective understanding that the masochist and/or submissive partner actually holds and maintains substantial power, despite feminist assertions to the contrary. Helga explained:

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<sup>36</sup> Rosenjoy, 11, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Lipschutz, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Rosenjoy, 10.



I'm tied up, helpless, the total M. She seems to have all the power over me. *But*, if she passes my pain threshold, she ruins my pleasure. The end of the game is sexual satisfaction. If she hurts me either physically or psychically (says hurting things), I move away from sexual satisfaction. Of course, I must tell her or otherwise show her when she has reached my limit, guide her into doing things that will please me. That's how the M stays in control.<sup>39</sup>

As part of their feminist employment of SM, these women applied the lessons they learned about power to larger, "real" world problems. For example, Rosa explained, "S&M is a liberating game; it liberates both man and woman, butch and femme without necessarily taking their chosen roles away from them (if they still want to keep them once they understand the game)." She added, "S&M teaches you that both sides have the power and how they can use it to their best advantage."<sup>40</sup> Not only, then, did these women see SM as a way to understand power inside sexual relations, they used that knowledge to analyze broader relationship and social issues.

Similarly, many SM women included the possibility for emotional catharsis or therapeutic release as a positive effect of their sexual practices. Ruth claimed "When I was denying my sado-masochistic needs (most of my life) I was still satisfying them through verbal S-M games." She explained, "Since I have begun to reaffirm the S-M aspects of my sexuality, the amount of time I spend with my lover in verbal S-M exchanges has sharply declined. I find *this* a relief."<sup>41</sup> Rosa agreed: "You think that dominating your lover in bed is different from dominating her mind with words. S&M people don't make that distinction." She continued, "S&M is not just a sex game. You can use it to handle all your relationships, love and work and friendship."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rosenjoy, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Rosenjoy, 11, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Lipschutz, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenjoy, 10.

In addition to explaining the positive effects of SM, the women claimed positive aspects of their sexuality as a way of both fending off arguments that sado-masochism was a sickness and contending that, if done correctly, it could help further feminist causes such as reducing women's guilt and increasing their sexual pleasure. "If they have better relationships because they understand the dynamics of S&M, they must be healthier than if they had bad ones." Nevertheless, Rosa explained, "an M can allow the S&M scene to be the punishment for some bad behavior ... it can be cathartic..."<sup>43</sup> This theme of healing repeated in Helga's observations, "...since she is physically unable to move, she can feel as if the sexual thing is being done to her. That can give a person freedom to express feelings." She reasoned, "in our culture you're taught to control your emotions [which has] made many people feel guilty about expressing emotion. I believe that B&D [bondage and domination] can help you to handle [that] guilt." And continued, "One friend of mine was able to have her first orgasm that way. ... S&M can be healthy in the right hands."<sup>44</sup> Far from seeing their participation in SM as psychologically damaging or sick, these women saw it as a way of managing and healing the damage inflicted on them by various patriarchal forces. In these two articles, feminist women began publicly claiming SM *as* a feminist practice. It helped them redefine their relationship to power not only in their personal relationships but also in terms of larger political power structures. At the same time, these women experienced SM as useful in allowing them to throw off societally enforced ideas about how women should emote, behave and be sexual.

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<sup>43</sup> Rosenjoy, 10-11.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenjoy, 11.

As these conversations emerged in feminist discourse, the broader movement turned its attention to a new campaign for social change: confronting violence in the media through boycotts, protests and even the destruction of property. In response to the film “Snuff,” which was distributed across the country in 1976, various feminist coalitions formed to protest, and if possible prevent the showing of, this “porno-violence film whose advertising hypes the dismemberment and murder of a woman.”<sup>45</sup> The feminist action in Los Angeles led to the formation of Women Against Violence Against Women, which originally came together as an ad hoc coalition but decided to continue their work. “As feminists concerned with rape,” the members declared, “[w]e intend to maintain a network which can respond to other examples of media violence. We want to make porn-violence unprofitable, unacceptable and unhip in this society.”<sup>46</sup>

While the formation of such groups added to the feminist political landscape in 1976, analyses of the media’s objectification of women as well as pornography, and its relationship to violence against women had been discussed for years. In its 1970 Declaration of Women’s Independence, the Boston-based feminist group Bread and Roses called for an “end to advertising which exploits women’s bodies to sell products.”<sup>47</sup> That same year, Roxanne Dunbar of New York’s Cell 16 wrote, “pornography ‘expresses a masculine ideology of male power over females’” and “maintained that pornography *is* violence against women...”<sup>48</sup> A few years later, Robin Morgan published an essay in which she drew a variety of connections between violent and pornographic images of women and actual violence against women. She concluded,

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<sup>45</sup> “‘Snuff’ Shut Down By Protests, Stink Bombs, Brick,” *Lesbian Tide* (May/June, 1976): 4.

<sup>46</sup> “‘Snuff,’” 6.

<sup>47</sup> Bread and Roses, “Declaration of Women’s Independence,” in *Dear Sisters*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Echols, 165.

“we must admit that pornography is sexist propaganda, no more and no less. *Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice.*”<sup>49</sup> Yet it was with the anti-“Snuff” campaigns that feminists began organizing more systematically against various forms of (or inspirations for) violence against women.

In Los Angeles, as in other places, anti-porn organizing continued throughout 1976 and resulted in two major campaigns. The first was “a successful campaign to remove the Rolling Stones’s [sic] ‘Black and Blue’ billboard ... which depicted a sexualized bruised woman with hands tied above her head and the slogan, ‘I’m Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I love it’.”<sup>50</sup> Here, feminists targeted an ad with a decidedly sado-masochistic theme, marking it as pornographic and, therefore, not only offensive to but oppressive of women. Later that same year, the group launched a national boycott of record distributor WEA, Inc. demanding that they prohibit images of violence against women from their album covers. In doing, so these anti-pornography activists not only laid the groundwork for later boycotts against various forms of pornography, but also demonstrated their growing power as a political force.<sup>51</sup>

Nascent discussions of lesbian sado-masochism nested within broader debates and campaigns about various forms of sexual exploitation and representations of violence. In the feminist journal, off our backs, author Carol Anne Douglas took on the question: “s&m—sensuality or machismo?” Appearing only a few shorts months after Ruth’s second article, the Gay Community News roundtable and the campaigns against “Snuff,” Douglas raised some critical issues about lesbian SM. SM, Douglas contended was

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<sup>49</sup> Robin Morgan, *The Word of a Woman*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Baxandall and Gordon, 171.

<sup>51</sup> London, Julia, “Boycotting Pornographic Record Covers,” in *Dear Sisters*, 171-2. The boycott of WEA, although it took three years, was successful.

neither a feminist practice nor “just a new, free means of sexual expression.” It was based on women’s oppression which had conditioned them to experience pain as part of love. Lesbianism, she argued, offered an alternative form of kinder and more gentle sexuality: “Many of us are drawn to lesbianism because we feel that we can give and receive a kind of love that focuses on tenderness and tries to always be tender (in wild ways at times).”<sup>52</sup> Douglas did admit that lesbians sometimes “turn[ed] our pain on each other,” but she placed the responsibility for this violence on the injuries women sustained “by living in patriarchal society.” Douglas absolved lesbians any personal responsibility for SM practices (and/or women hurting other women) by repositioning them as victims, albeit victims turned perpetrators.<sup>53</sup>

Turning from the externalization of women’s pain to self-proclaimed S&M practitioners, Douglas asked a number of important questions. First, she pondered why women might enjoy SM and suggested that internalized homophobia is the major reason why women might be masochists. She was similarly suspicious of sadists and implies that women with sadistic desires are imitating men while shoring up the connection between sadism and male sexuality. Thus, she asserted as other Second Wave feminists before her, that they are one in the same. In doing so, Douglas not only denied women authentic sadistic desire, she also voiced the first explicit critiques of sado-masochism based on the essentialist idea that women are inherently non-sadistic and could only acquire those traits by emulating men.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This assumption of a “kinder, gentler” lesbian sexuality is woven throughout early lesbian-feminist discussions of sex. See, for example, *Loving Women* (CA: The Nomadic Sisters, 1975) among others.

<sup>53</sup> Carol Anne Douglas, “S&M—sensuality or machismo?” *off our backs*, 6: 4, (June 30, 1976): 14.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas, 14.

Douglas then pondered bondage as an alternative practice that did not necessarily involve pain. While she again critiqued these practices, she was more open to the theoretical possibility that this particular practice could be liberatory. Still she asked, “Is this a safe way of expressing the desire to be helpless,” she wondered, “or will it continue to increase our desire for helplessness and dependency—hardly useful for oppressed people engaged in political struggle.” Then, in an interesting effort to take SM on its own terms, Douglas cautioned those engaged practitioners to “be sensitive about questions of race and class,” and articulated some SM scenarios that might be complicated by such power differentials, such as a black and white pair or a cross-class couple.<sup>55</sup> These questions remained largely unresolved during the coming Sex Wars, although at least one forum attempted to explore some of the more difficult issues.

A group of twelve women gathered in October 1976 at the “Healthy Questions About Sado-Masochism,” workshop to grapple with the problems of lesbian SM. In the first known meeting of its kind held at the Women’s Health & Healing Conference in Los Angeles, workshop participants discussed their physical, mental, spiritual, political and sexual experiences with SM. While many of these women’s observations resonated with or underscored themes addressed in earlier publications, they added to the analysis and discourse by discussing feminism as a way of accepting SM and the concept of consent as an important analytical tool. The workshop also offered the first public description of masochism by a lesbian-feminist.<sup>56</sup> The participants confirmed the continued silence

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<sup>55</sup> Douglas, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Jeanne Cordova, ed. “Towards A Feminist Expression of Sado-Masochism,” *Lesbian Tide*, (November/December 1976), 14. This workshop apparently took place in LA—although the article does not indicate the location of the workshop, *Lesbian Tide* was published there. Also, in her description of the creation of Samois, Pat Califia indicates that she attended this workshop and locates the conference at Los Angeles City College. See Califia in *Coming to Power*, p. 246.

around lesbian SM, with one participant reporting “I’ve never talked about it with other lesbians. I wanted to sort of come out!” Another workshop attendee explained the reticence of many: “We had a sexuality workshop a year and a half ago, and I ... came out as a sado-masochist there and got *no* support ...” Fear of rejection, or at the very least lack of acceptance, from the broader feminist community—including other lesbians—continued to be a major deterrent for many lesbians interested in sado-masochism.

This reluctance was deeply tied to debates over whether SM was feminist. In addressing this central theme, WK, the workshop facilitator,<sup>57</sup> asserted that it was important to share information before making judgments as she did not want to “become preoccupied at an early stage whether S&M is feminist or moral.” She clarified that “I think there are a lot of people here who need more information and permission before we slap sanctions on ourselves.” One participant endorsed the facilitator’s desire for more information, but also declared, “I feel a gut level integration between my being a sado-masochist and a feminist but I can’t find the words for it yet because I know so little.” Another workshop participant, rather than evaluate sado-masochism in terms of its compatibility with feminism, used her feminist framework to accept her own sado-masochism, arguing that a central tenet of feminism was “the issue of choice and freedom to do what you want to do, and have fantasies you want and still be committed to the movement.” She then added, “I’m one of the most committed feminists that I know and my sex life has very little to do with it.” It is significant to note that while claiming that she saw no connection between her sex life and her politics, she employed a

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<sup>57</sup> The article only uses initials because while the participants consented to being taped for the purposes of publication of the transcript, permission to use names was neither asked nor given. Cordova, 14.

definition of feminism that supported women's right to their chosen sexualities (and her right to choose SM in particular). A fellow participant followed a similar analytical route. "I feel S&M sexuality is political to the extent that the personal is political. The way I conduct myself in my personal life makes a statement about what I believe." Each of these lesbian sado-masochists used her feminist ideology to accept her desires. Clearly within this group, lesbian SM was not only theorized as a feminist activity but also feminist theories were mobilized to accept sado-masochism.<sup>58</sup> While many points conveyed by workshop participants echoed or expanded on earlier pro-SM analysis—a knowledge of power relations and SM's cathartic possibility—there are significant shifts in the discourse as well.

Part and parcel of their evaluation of sado-masochism through a feminist lens, these women pondered the connection between this kind of sexual play and *actual* violence against women. One workshop participant explicitly addressed the issue, "I came primarily to get definitions clear about how people define different acts. What is the fine line which divides S&M from rape? Is there a fine line? It is a continuum?" She continued, "There are very distinct differences in my mind." Tackling feminist concerns regarding violence against women head on and confronting their own fears as well as the assumptions and objections of others, these women clearly viewed sado-masochism as different from violence. The consensus among the workshop participants was that the distinction lay in the presence (or absence) of consent. One woman explained:

I used to feel guilty and think maybe what men say 'every woman wants to be raped' is true because I had those kinds of fantasies of sado-masochism. It took me a while to realize there is a difference between setting up a game with my lover and saying this is my fantasy, where you have the control, that's different from rape, which is not consensual.

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<sup>58</sup> Cordova, 16.



Another participant echoed this belief, “There is a bond of trust if you’re doing S&M ... there is a *complicity*, there is a *choice* there.” While previous explanations of SM included numerous references to the trust that was necessary between SM partners, none specifically claimed consent as a critical dividing line. The dialogue about consent expanded pro-SM rhetoric and logic and offered a direct response to the growing campaigns against violence against women and the feminists who argued that SM resembled such acts.<sup>59</sup>

Sexual pleasure as a major reason for practicing SM marked another significant shift in the discussion. Perhaps because it was a workshop full of women who supported at least a neutral investigation of SM, one woman dared confess that pain was a sexual stimulant for her. “Talking about pain,” she said, “when I am getting progressively more turned on toward orgasm, pain gradually diminishes and turns into something else. So for me, being bitten really hard or being scratched, or being beaten is a turn on.” Still, she admitted, “When I’m down and cooled off I might say, my god, what I have been doing, but because I was aroused it’s a whole different expression.” Though power/dominance and submission and restraint/bondage had been discussed in sexual terms, this description of sexual masochism is noticeably absent from earlier defenses of lesbian SM, all of which discuss pain **only** as a vehicle for emotional or spiritual transcendence. However, this woman located her attraction to pain in a specifically sexual experience and highlighted the omission of physical desire in earlier analyses. What may have been presumed previously was now openly proclaimed.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cordova, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Cordova, 14 & 17.

Reader response to the Tide's coverage of the workshop, though swift and powerful, generally recapitulated earlier discussions of the issue and rather neatly staked out the three main positions on lesbian feminist SM. Indeed, the Jan/Feb issue did *not* contain the promised second half of the transcript,<sup>61</sup> but did contain two full pages of reactions to the first half. One letter, signed by eight women, criticized the Tide for "printing the article without any critical analysis of both the origins and practice of Sado-masochism." Additionally, they took a hard-line position that excluded SM from a feminist sexuality. Claiming feminism was a "means ... ultimately breaking down power imbalances," they were concerned that "others define feminism as a catch-all phrase connoting a kind of choice and freedom that can also depend on [those] very kind of power relationships." More specifically, they defined "the attempted connection between sado-masochism and Feminism as being one of those distortions." The letter continues, "Lesbians must not perpetuate the idea (or the practice) that Sado-masochism is a part of women's sexuality," and challenged pro-SM women to examine their desires, rather than accept them. In doing so, these women clearly articulated the feminist as anti-SM position.<sup>62</sup>

The editorial that followed addressed several key issues, while also revealing the editors' emphasis on the importance of open inquiry and dialogue in the feminist community. The editors claimed they printed the article "based on a desire to open up dialogue on a topic that has been underground," and in doing so they "hoped to provide a safe arena to discuss the topic." Specifically addressing the critique that SM was male-centered, they asserted, "S&M may not necessarily be a male defined expression of

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<sup>61</sup> The first half of the proceedings were transcribed in the November/December edition of the Lesbian Tide, with a promise that the second half would come in the next month's issue.

<sup>62</sup> "Letters on S&M and Feminism," *Lesbian Tide*, (Jan/Feb, 1977): 18.

sexuality in women” since “it is apparent [that SM is a] chosen part of some feminists’ sexuality.” They reminded their readers that the “dialogue on S&M has only begun,” and they hoped that “a feminist analysis ... can be formulated by all of us.” With this response, the editors of the Tide not only echoed Jay’s 1974 discussion in a non-practitioner (at least not ‘out’ practitioner) defending the possibility of feminist sado-masochism, but also staked out a feminist position that called for more discussion.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, one practitioner wrote a long letter defending SM. She chose anonymity but identified herself as a “lesbian feminist who has facilitated a lesbian sexual fantasy group with a focus on S&M.” She praised the Tide for offering the article as an alternative to “misrepresentations of the subject.” S&M was not necessarily male-defined, she insisted, and was sexually pleasurable for those who partook in it. Directly quoting Douglas’ article in off our backs (though without attribution), she denied that people participated in SM because of “guilts.” At several points in her response, she addressed the concern that sex be politically correct and made it clear that she did not agree. Rather, she claimed, that women should encourage themselves and one another to explore their sexuality. She also re-iterated a number of other pro-SM arguments, including the necessity of trust and the claim that SM is a legitimate form of lovemaking. In doing so, she summarized the practitioner defense position.<sup>64</sup>

The majority of responses in the following issue of the Tide similarly echoed the existing discourse. Among the three letters to the editor, one called for more analysis of SM by the author of the pro-SM letter in the Jan/Feb issue; one simply thanked the Tide for the Nov/Dec article, stating that it was “refreshing to see some positives”; and the

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<sup>63</sup> “Letters on S&M and Feminism,” p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> “Letters on S&M and Feminism,” 19.

third critiqued lesbian sado-masochists for calling themselves feminists.<sup>65</sup> However, in addition to responses that fell along the established positions, there was an article that offered an interesting analysis and critique of both lesbian-sadomasochism **and** the anti-SM feminist response. In “S&M: The Boundaries of Feminism,” Susan Helenius charged that the lesbian sado-masochists quoted in the *Tide* article, “don’t seem to know *why* they’re doing it,” and argued that this “smacks of incompetency to ... explain its existence by saying it ‘feels good’, by-passing ... [that SM] is generally understood by the populace at large to look very bad.” Given their inability or unwillingness to explain themselves to her satisfaction, Helenius advised lesbian sado-masochists to be more self-reflective. She then took anti-SM feminists to task, claiming that “to identify women who experiment with S/M as anti-feminist when they so clearly feel they are feminists is ... sadistic and ... forces feminism to lock horns with civil liberties.” Helenius cautioned, “To section off differences, *any* differences between women on the basis of preferences ... is to invite defections.” In closing, she summarized “no doubt they [lesbian SMers] believe they know something the rest of us can profit from and need to know ... [but] We certainly do need for them to do better ... So far, they’ve stubbed their toes against some great inner mystery and ... have nothing to report except scuff marks.” Helenius thus not only joined first Karla Jay and then the Lesbian Tide editors and Jay in calling for a broader dialogue about the meanings and possibilities of a feminist sado-masochism, she also voiced the first critique of anti-SM feminists, thereby expanding the terms of the debate to include their tactics and rhetoric.<sup>66</sup> The debate about lesbian SM now

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<sup>65</sup> “Continued Controversy on S&M,” *Lesbian Tide* (Mar/Apr, 1977): 12 & 37.

<sup>66</sup> Helenius, Susan, “S&M: The Boundaries of Feminism,” *Lesbian Tide* (Mar/Apr, 1977): 8-9.

incorporated not only central issues about whether or not SM was feminist, but also the very definition of a feminist.

Despite individual and collective claims that lesbian S/M emerged suddenly, without warning, at the beginning of the Sex Wars of the early 1980s, the practice had become a hot-button issue in the feminist community by at least mid-1977. Indeed, a feminist sexual ethos had been developing since the early days of the Second Wave, and the existence of lesbian SM prompted feminists to further investigate, problematize and theorize the nature of power and patriarchy. Moreover, throughout the decade, other feminist campaigns and theories, such as those combating violence against women, co-mingled with the SM debate, and played an important role in complicating feminist ideas about violence and consent. By 1977, distinct positions had developed, not only regarding SM as a feminist issue but also the underlying question about who was a feminist and how that boundary was drawn. As these discussions intensified in nature and frequency, the issue of lesbian SM took center stage; it would not be long before large numbers of feminists on all sides of the issues weighed in.

## Chapter Two

### More than Scuff Marks to Report: Feminist Lesbian SMers Organize

In the early summer of 1978, amid and at least in part in response to the growing and heated debate regarding the feminist (im)possibilities of lesbian sado-masochism, a small but determined group of women organized the first independent lesbian sado-masochist group, Samois (pronounced Sam-wah). Weaving together lesbian feminism, gay rights and the politics of sexual freedom, these women created and developed a community committed not only to challenging the status quo on a myriad of fronts but also providing each other with education, emotional support and opportunities for sexual collaboration. Yet, this coming together did not mean the dissolution of difference. Serious debates and contentions regarding a wide range of boundaries, from community membership to acceptable practices, simmered just below the surface, betraying the community's apparent unity and cohesive public message. This chapter traces the development of women's involvement in the SM community from the days when they played supporting actresses through their rise to leading ladies, replete with their own backstage dramas. At the same time, it demonstrates the centrality of both feminist politics and the broader gay rights and pansexual SM movements to the development of this unique poli-socio-sexual community of lesbian sado-masochists. And it highlights how quickly this community became a lightning rod for local and then national feminist debates about sexual practices.

While it was not until 1978, with the creation of Samois, that women officially organized *as* lesbian sado-masochists, women had long been involved in other SM communities and, of course, in sado-masochist activity. A history of the activities of female sado-masochists is beyond the scope of this study, but the history of women's involvement in both the gay male scene and mixed-gender clubs is not. As we shall see, women had been actively involved in organizing around their deviant sexuality in a variety of ways before they moved to formalize their associations and to separate themselves from men.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, at least a small number of women were key players in the creation of the early gay male Leather community and culture. The involvement of Agnes Hassett and Jeanne Barney provide a lens into the unique position of women in this otherwise all-male world. Agnes Hassett was the original legal owner of one Chicago's earliest leather bars, the Gold Coast, because, according to Hassett, she was helping out Chuck Renslow, who ran the bar but could not own the bar himself. In fact, she was so willing to help Renslow that a couple of years later, when there was trouble because the bar was being investigated, Hassett married Renslow to lend legitimacy to their ownership-management arrangement. Despite the fact that Hassett was partnered with a woman for at least twenty years beginning shortly after she married Renslow, she was an important, if almost invisible, figure in the creation of the vibrant gay male leather scene in Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

Jeanne Barney played a similar supporting role as a woman in the gay male community. In the mid 1970s, she was writing an advice column for the *Advocate* (a gay/lesbian lifestyle publication) when she was approached by two men who were

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<sup>1</sup> Agnes Hassett, Interview with Jack Rinella, transcript, 5, Leather Archives & Museum (LA&M).

starting a Leather magazine and wanted her to do a similar column for their nascent publication.<sup>2</sup> Barney agreed and wrote “Smoke from Jeannie’s Lamp” for Drummer four issues. The column featured readers’ (all male) letters and Barney’s responses on topics as wide ranging as how to achieve orgasm, silicone penis injections and a wide variety of specifically SM related questions ranging from key definitions to how to find a partner with a similar fetish.<sup>3</sup> In addition to offering advice, Barney served as the editor in chief of the magazine for the first twelve issues.<sup>4</sup> While these are only two examples, Barney’s and Hassett’s stories suggest that at least some women were not only accepted into the early gay male leather scene, but were instrumental in its creation.<sup>5</sup>

In 1972, Echo of Sappho, a lesbian publication out of Washington D.C. ran a seven page article exploring the idea of SM through an interview with a female member—Beverly—of the nascent The Eulenspiegel Society (aka TES). In the article, Beverly explains that she is gay and that she often works with another gay woman in dominating a male submissive. Foreshadowing the discussions, debates and divisions that occurred in the mid-1970s, Beverly also discussed her feminist objections to dominating other women, the centrality of consent in any SM engagement and the possible liberatory nature of SM as a practice.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, she also explained that TES had an all women’s “sexual fantasy” subgroup “where women can come and just talk,

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<sup>2</sup> Jeanne Barney, Interview with Jack Rinella, transcript, 4, LA&M.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Barney, “Smoke from Jeannie’s Lamp” *Drummer*, Vol 1, Issues 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Barney, “Smoke from Jeannie’s Lamp” *Drummer*, Vol 1, Issues 1-12. Whether or not Barney herself was into SM is unclear, though given her detailed answers to readers’ questions and the fact that she was accepted as an authority by both readers and publishers, it seems likely that she had at least some personal experience. Also, I think it’s important to note the irony that the first editor and advice columnist of what would become one of the most influential gay male SM publications was a woman.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps further research would yield evidence of other women who played similarly important roles in the gay male Leather scene, though the existing historical record already shows that these were not the only women active in the early Leather/SM scenes.

<sup>6</sup> Though she does not seem to believe that this is possible for lesbian relationships as she contends that she is unable to inflict intense pain on other women and is unable to maintain SM relationships with people she knows intimately.



even if they're not into the scene; perhaps come-out a little or at least find out where other women are at." Beverly admits that while more men than women had come-out as SMers, she believed that there were "many more women who are so inclined" and encouraged them to come to the fantasy group meetings and explore their ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Women's involvement in the early pansexual SM community was not limited to TES in New York City, however. In fact, on the West Coast, The Society of Janus, founded in the Bay Area in 1975, not only had numerous female members but was co-founded by a woman.<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Slater, who established the club with her male lover, did so because they had a hard time finding information on SM. Additionally, Slater later recalled, she and her partner were disappointed by their experiences with supposedly sex-positive groups where "women were traded around like fuckable commodities on the New York Stock Exchange."<sup>9</sup> So, in August of 1975, Slater started holding monthly meetings in her house, where members of both sexes were fed a "steady diet" of "information and support," though Slater admitted, in those days, many heterosexual men attended for the sole purpose of "dogging the women."<sup>10</sup>

It was not long before a women's subgroup emerged within Janus.<sup>11</sup> But rather than abandon Janus for an all-female SM space, Slater continued to play an important

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<sup>7</sup> "Sexual Freedom: Sadism/ Masochism (S&M) as a form of sexual liberation," *Echo of Sappho*, (Summer 1972), 13-19.

<sup>8</sup> The group was founded by Cynthia Slater and Larry Olsen in 1975. There are conflicting reports regarding the actual origin of the club, including but not limited to who was involved in the founding, the naming of the group and so on. For more information on the history of The Society of Janus (SoJ), see the group's institutional history created for their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, available at their website at: <http://www.hawkeegn.com/bdsm/janhis.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Van Meter, Eric, "S&M: The Last Taboo," *Drummer*, Issue 27, Spring 1980, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Van Meter, Eric, "S&M: The Last Taboo," *Drummer*, Issue 27, Spring 1980, 34.

<sup>11</sup> T. Weymouth, "Society of Janus: 25 Years," Society of Janus, <http://www.hawkeegn.com/bdsm/janhis.pdf> (accessed 10/24/10), 10-14; Interestingly enough, the flyer likely advertising this group used similar language to The Eulenspiegel Society, with "Lesbian Sexual Fantasy" in three lines of capital letters, and "S&M Rap Group" underneath in a smaller one-line subtext.

role incorporating women into the broader SM community even as she helped create a distinct women's community. Slater was the first woman allowed to attend the Saturday parties at the infamous Catacombs in San Francisco, a renowned gay male fisting club that was shut down in the wake of the hysteria surrounding the early AIDS epidemic. Slater was also instrumental in bringing Pat Califia and other women to the Catacombs' parties (where after Samois' inception, Califia helped organize the first women's party). Thus, Slater's powerful leadership of this pansexual club not only highlights the centrality of women to the pansexual community but also the ways that role helped support the creation of the early women's SM community.<sup>12</sup>

From the early years of the gay men's community through the 1970s and the creation of pansexual groups, women were important, if at times marginalized, members of the emerging Leather/SM communities. It was out of these two communities, gay male Leather and pansexual SM, that Samois emerged.

Founded in San Francisco in June 1978,<sup>13</sup> Samois, the first organized, public lesbian SM group in the world, developed slowly. Emerging out of the all-women but mixed orientation sub-group of The Society of Janus, Cardea (as the group called itself) was seen as "a safe place where women could find out more about SM as stepping stone leading into Janus."<sup>14</sup> Pat Califia, who had attended the "Healthy Questions"

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Flyer found in Samois file at Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of North California (GLBTHS).

<sup>12</sup> Rubin, Gayle, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole" *Drummer*, Issue 139, Fall 1985, p. 31; Weymouth, 10-14.

<sup>13</sup> It seems significant that the group was formed shortly after the White Night riots in San Francisco in which gay and lesbian citizens took to the streets, protesting and destroying property in a display of anger over the leniency in conviction and sentencing of Dan White, former City Supervisor, who assassinated Mayor Moscone and the city's first openly gay City Supervisor Harvey Milk.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Califia, "A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco," in Samois, *Coming to Power*, Alyson Publications, Boston, MA, 1987, 247-249. For even

workshop in Los Angeles in 1976 and was a member of Cardea, decided to try to start a specifically dyke-centered support group with two other women. Califia recalled that in addition to contacting “everybody on the Cardea mailing list, a poster was designed and put up in the bars (where most of them were defaced or ripped down), and we tried to call everybody we knew who might be interested.” Despite all of these efforts, they “thought six or seven women would come.” They were pleasantly surprised when seventeen showed up. At this initial meeting, Califia reported, there was already discussion about some core issues. “We mostly discussed business—what to call the group, whether or not we were a feminist group, what we could do..., and tried to define the term ‘lesbian’ (i.e., could bisexual women come to our meetings?).”<sup>15</sup> Even before it was named, this first lesbian SM group grappled with the question of feminism and identity politics and agreed that their focus needed to be internal education on the actual practice of SM and educational outreach and activism to spread knowledge about lesbian SM.

At the second meeting, the group took the name Samois and, according to Pat Califia, “decided that we were bored with business and had to get some sex into our meetings.” So they settled on alternating between broader educational topics and discussions and classes in SM technique.<sup>16</sup> This dual purpose of advocacy and sex and they accompanying alternating structure lasted for most of Samois’ existence.<sup>17</sup> Initially, however, the group functioned with little formal structure, including no

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more information on Cardea, see pages 10-14 of SoJ’s institutional history available at: <http://www.hawkeegn.com/bdsm/janhis.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Califia, in *Coming to Power*, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Califia, in *Coming to Power* 253.

<sup>17</sup> Samois, Newsletters, 1979-1982, Samois Archives, GLBTHS.

newsletter, official meeting schedule, dues or officers.<sup>18</sup> While Samois began as an informal gathering, by the time of its dissolution four years later, the organization had become a formidable force in the Bay Area and in regional and national feminist communities as well. Samois had also begun spreading its message to a variety of other countries.

In just four years, these women created a community organized around three central driving forces: politics, social bonds and sexual pleasure, creating what I conceptualize as a “poli-socio-sexual” community. This both built on and departed from other politically motivated sexual communities, including gay and lesbian groups such as the Homophile League and the Daughters of Bilitis and sado-masochist groups like The Eulenspiegel Society and The Society of Janus. Like their gay-rights focused predecessors, Samois used their identity as members of a marginalized sexual minority as the central organizing force for their deeply political efforts and actions while building community. At the same time, like their sado-masochism-focused ancestors, Samois also focused on both building community and helping to enhance the sexual lives of its members. While this may have been a benefit of gay rights groups as well, such a claim was not usually stated, at least publically. Thus, Samois stands at the

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<sup>18</sup> Califia, in *Coming to Power*, 254. It’s not entirely clear why Samois resisted structure, perhaps it was because Califia and others had felt somewhat overwhelmed with logistics while helping to run Cardea, as reported in the Society of Janus history—again, see pages 10-14 of SoJ’s history, <http://www.hawkeegn.com/bdsm/janhis.pdf>. Several readers have pointed out, and I agree, that it’s curious that the Organizational Structure documents quoted later in the dissertation indicates a high level of structure, and thus stands in stark contrast to Califia’s characterization. Indeed, this marks a shift—over the course of the group’s existence, they came to believe that more structure would help them operate more effectively and offer greater protection to members.

intersection of the two movements, incorporating organizational values and strategies from both of its lines of heritage.<sup>19</sup>

Samois poli-socio-sexual focus is reflected in the groups' activities and writings throughout its four years. Additionally, these triple foci are specifically outlined in an elaborate set of policies published in a six-page document, produced sometime toward the end of the group's existence. The "Organizational Structure of Samois" included the group's statement of purpose, which was first and foremost to "be a visible, accessible group that will make it possible for women who are interested in lesbian S/M to find each other," squarely positioning sexual pleasure as the main organizing impetus. Samois also wanted "to build community by educating its members about safe S/M technique, etiquette, and dynamics through high-quality programs." And, lastly, Samois turned to politics saying that if they had "any energy left over," then members needed to "educate the outside world about S/M and protest police harassment and state repression against S/M people." In this regard, Samois noted that because they were a "lesbian feminist group," they felt a "special need to educate members of the lesbian feminist movement about S/M and to try to eradicate sexism from the larger S/M community."<sup>20</sup> This ranking of priorities is of particular interest because, over time, the group's activities and energy focused mainly on political endeavors, with community building and sexual pleasure taking a decidedly secondary position. This could suggest a gap between belief and practice, or it could be that the group's priorities began to shift in its third and fourth years (when this document was produced), or both. Whatever the explanation, this

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<sup>19</sup> This hybridity is also reflected in the later development of Leatherdyke culture, discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>20</sup> "Organizational Structure of Samois," no date, pg 1, Samois vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives. For more information on Samois growing infrastructure, see for example Samois newsletter, Aug 1979, p. 1 & Aug 1981, p. 2.

dissonance seems to have been one of the issues that led to at least some of Samois' internal conflicts and eventual disbanding.

In addition to its statement of purpose, the "Organizational Structure" document also called for the election of officers, outlined the structure and purpose of general meetings and six different committees, processes for outreach to interested women, applications for membership (including the reasons women could be denied) followed by a statement that they were "especially interested in making black and third world, working class, physically challenged, older, younger and fat women comfortable and welcome in Samois." The document then listed the privileges and responsibilities of membership and the procedure for revoking membership and then concluded with a section on rules, which highlighted central issues that had developed for the group during its brief existence. Of particular interest here is the focus on diversity as a core political value. Indeed, Samois developed a strong political position on a number of topics, and as previously mentioned, devoted much organizational time and energy to political endeavors.<sup>21</sup>

One of Samois' major political undertakings was to educate the broader Bay Area feminist community about lesbian-feminist SM. Despite obvious challenges, Samois experienced some limited success involving education in the women's community. In January 1979, Samois held a public presentation at Old Wives Tales, a feminist bookstore in San Francisco. According to Califia, the group "brought enough literature for 30 or 40 women, and were completely unprepared for the 140 who showed up."<sup>22</sup> While the content of the presentation is not reported in either Califia's article or later Samois

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<sup>21</sup> "Organizational Structure of Samois," no date, pp 1-5, Samois vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>22</sup> In "*What Color is Your Handkerchief*," Samois reports that there were over 150 women at this event. It does not seem a difference significant enough to alter the story, but one I thought important to note.

newsletters, the flyer advertised “The Truth About S/M! Hear the Experts” and announced an “erotic slideshow” and “discussion and information.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the size of the audience, there may have been some hostile reactions since a later presentation apparently “got a much more positive and supportive response.” According to a report penned a year after the original event, the second “audience [was] friendly and receptive, an altogether different feeling from the January 1979 presentation.”<sup>24</sup> Still, the very presence of 140 people at the first public discussion ensured that there was at least some pro-lesbian SM information being disseminated.

Throughout the group’s existence, Samois tried to make information about their particular brand of lesbian-feminist SM available to Bay Area women. The group regularly offered a bi-monthly orientation that gave potential or new members an opportunity to learn more about the group. It also offered at least one more “presentation to the lesbian community” in November 1979, which was attended by over one hundred women. A fourth public presentation was scheduled for April 12, 1981, billed as “Featuring not only Lesbianism and S/M, but exhibitionism! Samois answers the question, how perverted can you get?” Whether or not this presentation took place is unclear as there was no report after the final announcement in the April 1981 newsletter, but it was scheduled and advertised in the newsletter for several months.<sup>25</sup> While there are no detailed written records of what Samois presented at any of these gatherings, the group’s philosophies about lesbian feminist SM were clearly articulated in other ways.

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<sup>23</sup> Samois, “The Truth About S/M!” flyer, Samois Archives, GLBTHS. Thanks to Alice Echols for pointing out the reference to abortion speak-outs in the use of “expert” testimony.

<sup>24</sup> Califia in *Coming to Power*, 261; Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” 1979-1982.

Samois' most significant achievement during its first year was the publication of What Color is Your Handkerchief: a lesbian s/m sexuality reader. This informational booklet not only elucidated the group's political philosophies but also launched Samoa into the national lesbian-feminist spotlight. First published in June 1979 (and reprinted numerous times), the booklet offers information about Samoa as an organization and the state of lesbian sado-masochism as an emerging sexuality. On the inside cover, members explained that they created the booklet "to answer questions lesbians have about where S/M might fit in their lives. It is not a position paper, nor is it meant to be the definitive work on the topic of S/M." The introduction continued, "We drew material from [male and straight women sources] because it is all we have so far." Continuing the disclaimer, Samoa wrote, "There are shortcomings in all of it, and it is presented here to meet an immediate need for information and support."<sup>26</sup> Members thus acknowledged, as had earlier SM advocates, that there was little information regarding women's sexuality, particularly in terms of sado-masochism, and that they were attempting to help fill that void.

Though the introduction clearly stated that the booklet was not a position paper, Samoa nevertheless positioned itself squarely on a wide variety of controversial and deeply political issues. Samoa's two and a half page treatise, "Our Statement," outlined the group's beliefs as well their policy on confidentiality and membership procedures. Samoa members described themselves as "a group of feminist lesbians who share a positive interest in sadomasochism" and who "believe that S/M must be consensual, mutual and safe. S/M can exist as part of a healthy and positive lifestyle." They continued, "Many approaches to S/M are possible. However, its basic dynamic is an

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<sup>26</sup> Samoa, "About This Publication," *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, (June, 1979): inside cover.



eroticized exchange of power negotiated between two or more sexual partners.” Members also believed “that sadomasochists are an oppressed sexual minority” and that “S/M can and should be consistent with the principles of feminism.” They expounded this belief, “As feminists, we oppose all forms of social hierarchy based on gender. As radical perverts, we oppose all hierarchies based on sexual preference.”<sup>27</sup>

The booklet explained that they held monthly meetings, with alternating discussion and technique workshops, sponsored parties and provided information in pursuit of four aims, which they articulated in detail.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, to highlight the group’s aims the authors printed this section in italicized capitals. Among their central organizing ideas were:

*WE ACQUIRE AND CIRCULATE INFORMATION ON S/M TECHNIQUE.* One result of the suppression of S/M sexuality is that misinformation is common. Samois, like other S/M political organizations, feels an obligation to provide information on how to practice S/M safely, and to insist that neither physical safety nor emotional consideration need be sacrificed to mystique.

*SAMOIS HAS A UNIQUE RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP A LESBIAN-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON S/M.* This means identifying and criticizing heterosexist and male supremacist assumptions and practices whenever these are associated with S/M. It means distinguishing consensual S/M from popular misconceptions that S/M involves assault, rape, or violence.

*WHILE OTHER S/M ORGANIZATIONS SHARE THE GOAL OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING S/M, SAMOIS PARTICULARLY WISHES TO INSTIGATE DIALOGUE AND DISCUSSION OF S/M WITHIN THE LESBIAN AND FEMINIST COMMUNITY.* We have a double focus. We will work to promulgate feminist awareness among S/M people and we will struggle to end the stereotyping and stigmatizing of S/M among feminists.

*WE DEVELOP A NETWORK OF PERSONAL SUPPORT FOR S/M LESBIANS AND A SAFE SPACE IN WHICH TO EXPLORE, UNDERSTAND, ACCEPT, AND ENHANCE OUR EROTIC IDENTITIES.* Lesbian sadomasochists are isolated by the silence which surrounds our sexuality and the contempt to which it is subjected. Samois is an attempt to build community, lessen isolation, and sharpen consciousness.

Samois took the issues of feminism and the lack of information about and support for lesbian-sadomasochists seriously. Furthermore, in its first public statement Samois

<sup>27</sup> Samois, “Our Statement,” *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that by the time of this publication, the group had ceased sponsoring play parties, as discussed above. Perhaps the copy of the text had been completed before this decision was made and no one thought to edit it, or perhaps the writers/editors thought Samois would resume sponsoring play parties.

<sup>29</sup> Samois, “Our Statement,” *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 3.

demonstrated that it was not only self-defined as a feminist group, which was controversial enough, but also proclaimed the central goal of developing and dispersing an analysis of sado-masochism based on a feminist framework was central to the group's existence.

As part and parcel of this project, Samois was committed to offering information for those interested in SM, as evidenced by the inclusion of four pieces specifically aimed at education. One piece, "A Lesbian Glossary of S/M Terminology," incorporated twenty-six terms. These included "Bondage" which Samois defined as "Physically restraining someone to increase sexual excitement. Can be done with ropes, leather bondage cuffs, chains, silk ties, etc. *Also*: A psychological state of submission of one sex partner to the other(s)." "Masochism" was described as "Sexual pleasure derived from receiving pain or submitting to the power of a sexual partner in a safe, consensual situation ..." "S/M" was defined in the glossary as "A form of eroticism based on an eroticized exchange of power negotiated between two or more sexual partners." Throughout the glossary, Samois repeatedly emphasized not only the erotic sexual nature of SM, but also the importance of consent.<sup>30</sup> But the group went further than self definition and definition of terms.

In fact, What Colour is Your Handkerchief addressed the growing debate over SM in a myriad of ways. While most of the pieces in the booklet had been printed in other journals or newspapers, largely within the gay and lesbian community, taken together they help outline Samois' positions in the politics of the day. Barbara Ruth's articles, "Cathexis" and "Coming Out on S&M," Joan Bridi Miller's "Sado-Masochism—Another Point of View" and Terry Kolb's "Masochist's Lib" were all

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<sup>30</sup> Samois, "A Lesbian Glossary of S/M Terminology," *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 5-7.

including, offering readers a variety of perspectives, but all defending SM as part of a healthy sexual practice. At the same time, several of these pieces addressed discrimination against SM in the broader gay and lesbian community. For example, in “Don’t Close the Closet Door Just Because There’s Leather Inside,” the author, Skip A., condemned the failed political strategy of the gay and lesbian liberation movement to hide members of the SM/Leather community in order to gain legitimacy in mainstream society. The article also included a list of facts that were meant to counter various myths about Leather folk, emphasizing the diversity of people engaged in SM and their chosen activities as well as the centrality of consent.<sup>31</sup> This chorus of voices certainly lent legitimacy to Samois’ claims that not only could SM be part of a healthy sexuality, but helped to build a case that as a minority within a sexual minority, practitioners of SM faced unreasonable discrimination from other gay and lesbian rights advocates and feminists.

This case was made even stronger by the inclusion of Gayle Rubin’s “Sexual Politics, the New Right, and the Sexual Fringe.” Rubin, possibly a founder and definitely a member of Samois by the time of the booklet’s publication, offered an incredibly lucid assessment of the complexity of sexual politics in U.S. culture. By far the longest piece in the booklet, Rubin’s seven and a half page article had been previously printed in the *The Leaping Lesbian* and addressed a variety of issues facing sexual minorities and the sexual liberation movement. In it, she explained that recent panics over the sexual abuse of children were not only leading to increased anti-sex activism on the part of right-wing politicians, but also to the diminishing possibility of alliance between the

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<sup>31</sup> Skip A, “Don’t Close the Closet Door Just Because There’s Leather Inside,” *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, (June, 1979): 26-27.

broader gay and women's liberation movements and sexual minorities, including prostitutes, transvestites and sado-masochists. Yet, Rubin asserted, "It has never been more imperative that women's and gay movements develop more sensitivity to the problems, humanity, and legitimate claims of stigmatized minorities. If not, we will be contributing to a sexual witch hunt." She believed that it was important for the women's and gay movements to respond to the growing anxiety about all kinds of sexuality in American society because, "It would be a great loss to leave it to the reactionaries to orchestrate a societal response to this widening of sexual consciousness."<sup>32</sup>

While the article is aimed at both the women's and gay movements, Rubin's political message is specifically targeted to the feminist movement. For example, Rubin wrote, "The women's movement has always been suspicious of sex, and for good reason since sexuality is the locus through which women's oppression is managed. But rational paranoia can easily become a form of erotophobia." She continued this line of argument, and specifically addressed SM: "It would be a mistake to dismiss sado-masochism as the epitome of sexual hierarchy without some appreciation for the aspects of erotic sensitivity which it contains."<sup>33</sup> She also summed up her article with a strong message to feminists,

I am not suggesting that we abandon our critical capacity or feminist politics, or that the personal is not political. On the contrary, I am proposing that a commitment to the notion that the personal is political requires a more complex political assessment of sexual diversity, based on case by case examinations. Both the mobilization of the sexual fringe, and the increasing politicization of sexuality, challenge feminism to develop a politics which can be pro-sex while remaining anti-sexist.

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<sup>32</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Politics, The New Right, and The Sexual Fringe," *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, (June, 1979): 28-35.

<sup>33</sup> Rubin, in *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 28-35.

Rubin articulated her belief in the possibility of a pro-sex feminism and challenged readers to critique normative ideas about those on the sexual fringe.<sup>34</sup> In no uncertain terms, she presented a call to action, but one based mainly on what the women's and gay rights movements should not do. She offered solutions only in the broadest of theoretical terms. It is also interesting to note that if Rubin's piece is highly political and deeply theoretical, it also does not involve personal story-telling or emotional disclosures, but rather is based on logic and critical thought. In this way, her essay stands out from the other pieces in *What Colour*, particularly in contrast to another article whose intended audience was feminists who were actively critiquing SM.

"A Proud and Emotional Statement" by Janet Schrim was the singular original piece in the booklet and the first openly hostile message to anti-SMers. Opening the two page essay on the offense, Schrim argued "It's time and time past for some angry, emotional words to be published in favor of sm by a Lesbian and a feminist." Lesbian feminist SMers "had reasoned and reasoned only to meet unreasoning fear, prejudice, and political dogma." She was "tired of explaining sm" and was concerned because "After awhile explanation begins to be an apology... And I don't think that *anyone* should have to apologize for their sexuality." Besides, Schrim noted, "Analyzing and apologizing is not going to get us anywhere with people who have their minds made up against sm." The author clearly felt judged and threatened by anti-SMers and those presenting themselves as SM-skeptics.<sup>35</sup> "I feel like I've been much more open when I look at views opposed to sm than most of the opposition has been." Schrim continued, defiantly, "And, I'm tired of it. I don't want to hear any more disguised puritanism or any more

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<sup>34</sup> Rubin, in *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 28-35.

<sup>35</sup> Janet Schrim, "A Proud and Emotional Statement," *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, (June, 1979): 23-24.

unreasonable fear parading as moral or political righteousness.” She concluded by putting offenders on notice, “Anyone who starts stepping on our rights—be warned: you won’t get away with it.” Having delivered a clear ultimatum, Schrim became the first pro-SM lesbian to take a decisive public stand, not only calling anti-SMers unreasoned and puritanical but also threatening resistance to any attempts to deny SM women their sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

With this compilation of sources in What Colour is Your Handkerchief, Samois clearly positioned itself in the increasingly passionate political discussions of the day, within both gay and lesbian liberation and feminist movements. The inclusion of authors of a variety of sexes and sexual orientations helped build the case that SM could be a part of a healthy sexual practice while Rubin’s and Schrim’s articles challenged feminists’ growing anti-SM consensus. Within two years of its publication, the booklet gained Samois fame and notoriety on the national and international levels. Meanwhile, the group continued to engage in a wide variety of political activities.

Part and parcel of Samois’ attempts to increase local visibility and engage in the politics of sexual freedom, members participated in at least two Gay Freedom Day Parades. Once the group decided to march in the 1979 Gay Freedom Day Parade they “almost immediately got embroiled in a conflict with [the] parade committee.” Due to a 1978 confrontation between parade monitors and members of the Society of Janus (Califia included),<sup>37</sup> “a parade subcommittee [was] trying to pass a regulation that would

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<sup>36</sup> Schrim, 23-24. Schrim continued this pro-SM activism throughout her tenure in Samois (and possibly beyond). She penned several articles and letters to the editor to various women’s publications and was, it seems, a very active member of the club itself. For example, see Samois newsletters May 1980, February & March 1981 and January 1982.

<sup>37</sup> For more information on this rather funny/ bizarre story of what happened at the 1978 Gay Day parade, see SoJ history, pages 12-13.

ban leather and S/M regalia from the parade.” Various members of Samois (and one presumes Society of Janus and perhaps other local SM groups) attended meetings to ensure they could march freely as members of the gay community. Consequently, the parade committee “passed a regulation protecting dress and costume as a statement of individual preference that cannot be used as grounds to exclude groups or individuals.” Samois eventually marched in the parade, apparently without major incident; they also sponsored an information booth.<sup>38</sup>

In 1980, Samois again participated in the parade, amidst new controversies. First, the threat of exclusion loomed again. In April, the Samois newsletter announced that the parade committee had granted voting privileges to anyone who attended at least one meeting and encouraged members to attend to guarantee their freedom to dress as they wished.<sup>39</sup> Subsequent newsletters announce parade committee meetings but did not make any further reference to problems with inclusion. The June newsletter indicated that the group planned to march but was undecided about purchasing and staffing a booth at the event, due to another emerging issue. The Women’s Outreach Committee had asked Samois “to join in an economic boycott of the post-parade events and not have a booth” in order to highlight “political differences about [the] cost of parade participation [and] access for disabled people.” Samois was conflicted about whether or not to support the boycott because “a booth is a chance to reach hundreds of women we will never see otherwise and a chance for thousands of gay people to see us.”<sup>40</sup> Despite this, the group decided, ultimately, to support the boycott.

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<sup>38</sup> Califia in *Coming to Power*, 261-4; Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” April, June & July 1979.

<sup>39</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” April 1980.

<sup>40</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” June 1980.

In their post-parade report, Samois indicated that they had voted not to pay for a booth but also decided that “books, buttons and flyers could be there.” The report also noted that approximately “twenty women and one child marched with SAMOIS in the parade” and were told “we looked great ... organized [and] ... like a big contingent.”<sup>41</sup> The following year, the only mention of the parade was in the June 1981 newsletter, in which the group announced that a meeting was being held to “make signs and plan ... participation.” Samois later revealed that it was “not having an information booth after the parade” so the only chance to participate was to march. It is unclear whether or not earlier controversies over SM inclusion and/or the Women’s Outreach Committee’s concerns had been resolved or why Samois was no longer sponsoring a booth. It seems likely that the group’s involvement in other activities, such as producing a book and/or engaging in ongoing struggles with various women’s groups, may have taken energy away from the Gay Day parade.<sup>42</sup>

While Samois was politically active in a variety of ways, it was their engagement with the local and national feminist movements that helped launch SM into the center of the Sex Wars. Much of Samois’ time was spent attempting to offer public education regarding lesbian sado-masochism specifically within the lesbian-feminist and women’s communities, and those attempts were often met with strong resistance. Indeed, at any given moment during its existence, Samois was embroiled in conflict with one or more women’s groups regarding Samois’ access to feminist space, whether literally or figuratively. These conflicts were particularly clear in Samois’ efforts to address the concerns of Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM).

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<sup>41</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” July 1980.

<sup>42</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” June 1981.



Indeed, given the amount of time and attention Samois gave to engaging WAVPM over the next few years, it is clear that the one of the group's major *raison d'être* was to respond to the influence of this local anti-porn group. WAVPM, which formed out of the 1976 Bay Area Conference on Violence Against Women, organized events locally and was responsible for various anti-porn protests.<sup>43</sup> In one of their first newsletters in May 1979, Samois explained that they "first proposed a meeting to WAVPM 7 months ago" and were frustrated that their invitation had gone unanswered. While the newsletter stated that the purpose of the meeting was to "create communication" between the groups, Califia's recalled that there had already been communication between the groups, although it had been unproductive.<sup>44</sup>

The early tension between Samois and WAPVM over the latter's refusal to meet escalated through 1979 and resulted in the creation of a subgroup that wanted to "learn about WAVPM and suggest an action to be taken by SAMOIS."<sup>45</sup> Two months later, encouraging members to attend this newly formed group, Samois explained that the conflict was growing and suggested that understanding "the issues involved will help you protect your rights and feelings as an S/M Lesbian when facing hostility in our community."<sup>46</sup> But, the tension and hostility only escalated.

Samois announced it was planning an action at an upcoming WAVPM event to protest the fact that, despite the latter group's official neutrality on the issue of SM, members of WAVPM had made public statements denouncing the practice. At the same time, Samois was incensed that WAVPM was planning a public forum on SM even

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<sup>43</sup> Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, "WAPVM's First Five Years," *Newspage*, Vol VI, No. 5, (May 1982): 1.

<sup>44</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," June 1979, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," February 1980.

<sup>46</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," April 1980.

though it refused to acknowledge Samois' existence. Samois reported that their nemesis had invited individual members Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia to speak, offering them honoraria to do so, but they had refused on the basis that they did not want "to be singled out as individuals ... until WAVPM acknowledges the existence of S/M people as an oppressed minority."<sup>47</sup> Samois encouraged other members also to refuse to participate in the forum because WAVPM was using the event as a fundraiser but was not going to split the proceeds with Samois.

There is no report on what happened at the event nor is there any further discussion of conflict with WAVPM. The historical record remains oddly silent on the reason, but it seems likely that something shifted. Perhaps the sides agreed to disagree or perhaps both were engaged in other projects or controversies. It is also possible that the issue became so volatile and deeply personal that it was no longer appropriate to write about it in the newsletter. The answer may never be known, but given how the controversy over SM and its relation to feminist politics escalated exponentially over the next two years, it seems unlikely that the issue was resolved in any meaningful way.

WAVPM was not the only group that saw Samois' politics and activities as problematic. The group also met resistance from several feminist publications, at least one bookstore and the San Francisco Women's Building. The first of these conflicts appeared as a hint of resistance from A Woman's Place, a feminist bookstore in Oakland, California. The Samois newsletter reported in September 1979 that the bookstore collective "had hesitated about whether to carry What Colour is Your Handkerchief,"<sup>48</sup> but in the end decided to offer the booklet for sale. In July 1979 various community

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<sup>47</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," April 1980.

<sup>48</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," September 1979.

members implored the bookstore to offer the publication as part and parcel of its purpose as a community center. The group claimed that the bookstore was doing them “a great disservice” and asked that they be afforded access to this information and to judge the materials for themselves. Members even agreed that the booklet could be accompanied by one of the store’s “disclaimers’ below the shelf where it sits, noting that there’s been dissention among you about the pamphlet’s appropriateness.”<sup>49</sup> Despite the fact that A Woman’s Place agreed to sell the booklet, by March 1980, Samois reported that it was no longer available at the store. Some members inquired why this was the case and were told that the disclaimer cards, which were integral to the collective’s decision to make the booklet available, had been removed by some customers, and the collective members were “in no hurry to go to the trouble of writing them again.”<sup>50</sup>

That same month, members of Samois and their supporters investigated and responded to this possible censorship. The group found that the booklet was on sale, but only two copies were displayed, title side down. As planned, the group asked for a formal meeting with the collective, reasoning that “if they did not have such bigoted attitudes toward S/M, they would be unable to justify restricting distribution.” The meeting was denied on the basis that the store “had already made up their minds on this issue.” Samois was also informed that if the disclaimer cards were removed again, the booklet would “once again be taken off the shelves for an indefinite period of time,” and that the booklet had been displayed purposefully so as not to draw attention to it.<sup>51</sup> The Samois

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<sup>49</sup> “Letter to ‘Collective members’,” July 15, 1979; Samois vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives. Even though the document is unsigned without concrete evidence that it was sent or received, given the way the situation played out, with the bookstore following this advice of disclaimer cards, it seems extremely likely that this letter was sent by various members of Samois and received by A Woman’s Place.

<sup>50</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” March 1980.

<sup>51</sup> It is unclear exactly who was removing the cards. Samois reported that it was “irate customers” and explained that “Apparently Bay Area dykes are too independent-minded to appreciate being told what is

group charged the two collective members present with harassment of women who were interested in buying the booklet, but to no avail. By June of that year, the cards had been replaced and the booklet was again on sale. But, according to Samois, while the book was on sale, “in reality it is so well hidden behind their big disclaimer notices that even dedicated SAMOIS members couldn’t find it on their own until they asked the staff if indeed it was still being sold.”<sup>52</sup> The suggested solution was to offer the book for sale from under the counter. Despite all these problems, Samois reported in its April 1980 newsletter that the bookstore was the biggest seller of What Colour is Your Handkerchief. The last mention of the struggle with A Woman’s Place came in the July 1980 newsletter, when Samois encouraged members to keep checking that the booklet was available. As with WAVPM, the historical record is silent on the possible resolution of this conflict. Perhaps the bookstore gave up its resistance, perhaps Samois capitulated—both seem unlikely. Indeed while these controversies received little notice after July 1980, the newsletter continued to report on problems with other feminist organizations.

Shortly after the bookstore issue was seemingly resolved, another controversy was reported. For over a year, Samois had been engaged in trying to get the national feminist publication off our backs to print an ad for “What Colour is Your Handkerchief.” In October 1980, Samois reprinted a letter it had sent to the editors which asked for “a principled explanation ... [of their] decision-making process in choosing not to run [the] ad” and recounted the history of the exchange between the two

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and is not acceptable reading material.” But it is impossible to know if Samois or its members were in any way involved in the removal of these cards, which they characterize as “intimidating,” “misinformed, and vilifying. Given these characterizations and the animosity that had developed between these two groups, it seems logical to suggest that at least some of Samois were involved in this covert resistance to censorship.

<sup>52</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” June 1980.

organizations. In September 1979, off our backs had responded to Samois' ad request and check by asking the organization to provide the collective with a copy of the booklet because off our backs was "cautious about ads with sexual content." The editors assured them, however, that their check would be held until the collective heard back. Samois sent a copy of the booklet to the collective (though it is unclear when, exactly, this exchange occurred), and an entire year later the booklet and the check were returned without any explanation. In the response to off our backs, Samois contended that the booklet contained "little in the way of explicit sexual content" and took issue with the collective's decision not to run its ad as the newspaper had previously accepted ads for "other sexuality books."<sup>53</sup> Despite these protestations, off our backs refused to run Samois' ad.

Samois' problems with gaining admittance to feminist spaces did not end there. In the May 1981 newsletter, Samois announced that the Women's Building was "dithering" about whether or not to rent the group a meeting room and urged its members to encourage them to do so.<sup>54</sup> The following month the group announced that they had "won the fight to rent space in the women's building!" and thanked six members by first name "and all the other stubborn and enraged people who made this possible."<sup>55</sup> Yet, in December 1981, Samois sent a six page, single-spaced letter to the Community Advisory Board of the Women's Building, decrying problematic treatment and communications between the two groups. In the letter, Samois explained that they had engaged in two meetings with the staff of the Women's Building to answer their questions and address

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<sup>53</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," October 1980; Correspondence between Samois and *off our backs*, "Samois" vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>54</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," May 1981.

<sup>55</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," June 1981.

their concerns. At the end of the second meeting, Samois was assured that they would be rented space.<sup>56</sup>

Then, a couple of weeks before the planned event, Samois heard rumors that conditions were being placed on the rental agreement. The contact person was “asked to assure the staff that no one would be led around on a leash in the halls, that there would be no whipping or bondage in the halls, and that we would do nothing that would ‘offend or alarm other women in the building.’” The letter explained that the group had protested the first two points because they “were analogous to telling lesbians and gay men that they could use a public space only as long as they engaged in no overt expressions of homosexual affection.” As for the third point, Samois contended that they could not be held responsible if “[s]ome women might be upset or alarmed by our presence in the women’s building (or on the street or in the known universe).” Samois’s reasoned arguments were followed by a three paragraph denunciation of the practice of adding conditions after completed negotiations. The group then explained that they had contacted the booking person who informed the group that while the above concerns had originally been just that, Samois’ objections to them had caused the staff even greater concern and they were now “absolute conditions” and that they “could not meet in the building until we agreed to abide by these rules.”<sup>57</sup> After this, Samois contacted a member of the Community Advisory Board who informed the group that it probably would not have any problems with the rental so members decided to use the space without agreeing to the conditions. Apparently, the meeting went off without a hitch (except for the fact that Samois had been given the kitchen space which offered little

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<sup>56</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” June 1980.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

privacy). Given that Samois was allowed to rent and use the space without sacrificing its principles, it is somewhat curious that they chose to write a six page letter decrying the experience. It is clear from the final paragraph of the letter that Samois was again attempting to rent the space for meetings, yet it highlighted the problematic aspects of the experience with the Women's Building rather than the fact that it had used the space without incident. Perhaps the constant contention wore on members even when events occurred without further problems.

The situation with the Women's Building sheds light on earlier interactions with A Woman's Place and various other feminist organizations. Samois reported only on the problems it had with other organizations, and not the resolutions. The fact that the group was constantly embroiled in some battle or another, suggests that members may have been interested in creating and maintaining conflict within the feminist community as a way to heighten its visibility. At least in terms of its institutional dealings with other feminist organizations, Samois seemed willing to acknowledge that they were asking activists to explore issues that were paradigm-shifting and controversial. Yet, the group categorically refused to give other organizations the time and space that might be necessary to process that information. From existing records, it is hard to say whether this approach was the product of a small group of members or was the consensus of the entire group. Yet, the combative tone evidenced in the group's official interactions with other feminist organizations was very different from the overall tone of What Colour Is Your Handkerchief and their later publication, *Coming to Power*.<sup>58</sup> Both take a much less defensive approach to educating others about the issues at hand. Samois' more aggressive approach to institutional relations to be the result of a combination of factors,

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<sup>58</sup> This is, of course, with the exception of Schrim's in *What Colour*.

including general resistance from the feminist community to aggressive or “male” sexuality and Samois’ organizational defensiveness as a result of its members experiences with multiple oppressions (as women, as homosexuals, as sadomasochists, perhaps as working class and/or people of color), as well as the contentious personalities of some individuals.

Interestingly, Samois’ conflicts involved internal politics in addition to those with other groups. One major issue of contention concerned who could be a member of the group, particularly in terms of sexual orientation. In its official statement, the third rule stated that “any woman may join Samois who is interested in S/M sex with other women. We do not require members to define themselves as lesbians.” While this seems a clear-cut policy, the issue of identity-based inclusion was on the table from the very beginning. Dossie Easton, who identified as bisexual at the time and hosted Samois’ first play party at her house, remembers that at the post-party brunch: “this woman ... starts talking about bi women at the party, and if there could be bi women at Samois, and ... wouldn't that be a problem?”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, both the Samois pamphlet and the self-description in What Colour declared “We are a group of feminist lesbians who share a positive interest in sadomasochism,” even though their official set of rules published years later said that although women did not have to identify as lesbian, the group still called itself lesbian feminist.<sup>60</sup> Yet these statements of identity did not successfully resolve the debates. Issues of separatism and bisexuality were raised again in the December 1979 newsletter, less than a year later, when one member posted an announcement looking for “Separatists, Lesbian-identified-lesbians, man-hating castrating bitches” with whom she

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<sup>59</sup> Dossie Easton, interview with the author, March 20, 2008.

<sup>60</sup> “Samois” pamphlet, no date, Samois file, Lesbian Herstory Archives; “Our Statement” in *What Colour is Your Handkerchief* etc.



could “start a support group within Samois for dyke separatists into sm.”<sup>61</sup> This group became a reality by March 1982 as Samois declared that “since this group is open to non-Samois members that it is not officially a part of Samois,” but that they were “glad to see the group exist and would like to run notices of their meetings.”<sup>62</sup> Clearly the issue of inclusion and exclusion based on sexual and political identity continued to be a point of contention. The identity question speaks to Samois’ existence as a social group attempting to define the parameters of its unique community.

Despite internal disagreements and conflicts with other organizations, Samois did continually work toward its goal of bringing together and educating women into SM. All members received the group’s newsletter, which helped build community through news sharing and a regular advice column. Additionally, throughout its existence, the group sponsored events such as erotic readings, potlucks, afternoons at local bath houses, and fashion shows.<sup>63</sup> As it moved into its third year, Samois hosted a “Leather Dance” and the first “Ms. Leather Contest.” On Saturday, September 5, 1981, approximately three hundred women “crowded into Ollie’s Radclyffe Hall ... to leave movement politics behind” as the “purpose of the night was fun.” According to reports, there were three judges, over a dozen contestants and the winner was “Rachel,” about whom little is known, other than she was “6-feet in boots” and when “one of the judges asked permission to ‘check out the leather,’ Rachel complied. But, she added, ‘You should check out the person behind the leather first.’”<sup>64</sup> It is clear from this range of activities

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<sup>61</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Dec 1979, p. 1; October 1980, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” March 1982, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Dec 1979, p. 1; Oct 1980, p. 1; Jan 1981, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Oct 1981, p. 2 & 8 (pg 8 is actually a reprint of a p. 14 article from SFSU student newspaper, *The Phoenix*, run on Sept 10, 1981). While there is no concrete historical record of it, it seems likely that the very idea of a leather contest was inspired by women’s interactions with

that Samois was committed to creating community for women into SM and took many steps to ensure its success. Indeed, in 1981 Samois was nominated for a Cable Car Award for “Outstanding Community Contribution by a Leather/Fraternal Organization.”<sup>65</sup>

While Samois was successful in bringing together women who were into SM, community building was not without challenges. Indeed, the blossoming of community inspired a number of issues, beyond identity-based membership, that needed to be resolved. One recurring theme was the problem of privacy, which was an issue from very early on. The second newsletter, in May 1979, included an explanation of an incident in which a member “felt that her confidentiality and privacy had been violated when her work phone number was given out to a third party without her permission.” This resulted in the offending party being “denied membership in Samois” and “asked not to attend future meetings.” Privacy continued to be a pressing matter, and the first rule of the “Organizational Structure” declared that “each Samois member should protect other members’ confidentiality.” Specifically, members were not allowed to share contact information of members with non-members and that doing so was “grounds for losing your membership.”<sup>66</sup> To ensure that everyone knew about this policy, the February 1982 newsletter included the policy in an 8 line, all-capitalized statement.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that privacy was a central issue for Samois members, which is understandable given the political climate of the day, especially the increased scrutiny of the gay and lesbian

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the gay male Leather community, which was the site of the first International Mr. Leather contest in 1979. For more information on IML, see <http://www.imrl.com/history/index.php>.

<sup>65</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Feb 1981, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> “Organizational Structure of Samois,” no date, p. 5, Samois vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives (P. Califia makes reference to this document in her article in *Coming to Power*, which leads me to believe that was created in April of 1982, which is also the date of the document discussed at the end of the chapter that seems to herald the end of Samois.); Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” May 1979, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” February 1982, p. 1.

rights movement in general and the SM community in particular, the emerging AIDS crisis and the rise of the religious right.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, fatigue was an issue at a number of points throughout the years of the group's existence, with various officers and newsletter editors declaring that they needed to step down or step aside because they were burned out. In August 1980, there was no newsletter because there was no editor; and in January 1982, the group was looking for a new Orientation coordinator because the existing one was "exhausted."<sup>69</sup> Given the level of activity of the group, it is easy to understand that active members had a lot on their plate. Along these lines, it is significant that the group was also working on another major project.

In 1981, Samois followed up its earlier publication, "What Color is your Handkerchief?" with a full-length book, entitled *Coming to Power*. The book, which quickly became both a center of controversy in feminist press and a resource book for women interested in SM around the world, was 240 pages and included a wide variety of material, from first-hand accounts and informational pieces to science fiction and erotic stories. The volume also included some graphics and photographs as well as poetry and a seven-page introduction subtitled, "What We Fear We Try to Keep Contained." It began, "This is an outrageous book. It has many purposes and will have many effects on those who read it, on those who only hear about it, and on others who will never know that it exists." Davis, the author of the statement and representative of the Ministry of Truth,

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<sup>68</sup> Yet one wonders if there was an individual person or group of persons who were particularly concerned about this matter or if it was the group as a whole—from the historical evidence, it is nearly impossible to say. Interestingly, in the October 1980 newsletter, there is a lengthy description of a business meeting discussion about whether or not and under what circumstances Samois would allow journalists into their meeting.

<sup>69</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," August 1980, p. 1; January 1982, p. 2.

the group responsible for the book's publication, explained that SM was a topic of much debate in feminist circles and that as a result of the growing anti-SM consensus of some lesbian-feminists,

We are told S/M is responsible for practically every ill and inequity, large and small and that they world has ever known, including rape, racism, classism, spouse abuse, difficult interpersonal relationships, fascism, a liking of vaginal penetration, political repression in Third World countries, and so on.

Consequently, those lesbian-feminists who also happen to engage in sado-masochistic sexual behaviors "are being labeled anti-feminist, mentally ill or worse ... we find ourselves, quite unexpectedly, on the 'other' side. We are being cast out, denied. We become heretics." But, Davis explained, an alternative existed, even though it "is a much longer, more difficult road." This alternative path for lesbian-feminist meant reexamining "our politics of sex and power." More specifically, she exhorted readers:

We must talk about what we do as much as who we do it with. We will find many differences among and between us, but it is better to do this work than continually hide from our fears and insecurities. We must put the theoretical weaponry aside and willingly engage each other, without simply jumping ahead into a new sexual conformity. We must have precisely the same dialogues about the texture of our sexuality as we have been having about classism, racism, cultural identity, physical appearance and ability.

These theoretical and political underpinnings of the book are followed by an explanation of how which Samois came to create the book, including their process for selecting material for inclusion. Also part of the Introduction was an explanation of what was not in the book. "Not represented here," Davis explained, "are experiences clearly identifiable as being written by disabled women or women of color." Some of this lack of representation, they theorized, was due to the fact that their outreach "could have been better, more extensive." However, she was also careful to point out that some "feminist and lesbian publications would not print our call for material," and this "prevented many

lesbians from knowing about the book or how to get in touch with us.” Yet, despite these limitations, Davis closed

*Coming to Power* is a statement, a confrontation, and a challenge. It calls for a re-evaluation of existing lesbian-feminist ethics, saying ‘You must own your ‘illegitimate’ children.’ We offer you this document and hope that you will use it well for personal exploration, and as a tool for dialogue.

As is clear from this closing statement, the book was indeed intended for a lesbian-feminist audience, both those interested in SM as a sexual practice and those trying to understand the political implications of said practice.<sup>70</sup>

This intended audience and agenda are made clear not only through the explicit statements of the Introduction but also throughout the book in the thirty pieces. Almost half of these pieces included were first-person narratives that explained, in varying degree of detail, some aspect of lesbian SM activity and lifestyle. Ranging in topic from costume fetish and discipline to the use of language and coming out, these pieces were clearly intended to both humanize the image of lesbian sadomasochists as well as educate the reader by confronting the stereotypes about lesbian SMers with the reality of their experiences. Included in this group are a number of articles that specifically addressed why these individual women are interested in lesbian SM, one entitled “Reasons,” and what they get out of it, both as individuals and couples. While the implied audience for all of these pieces is a skeptical lesbian-feminist one, two articles directly engaged the political concerns at hand—outlining the wide range of defenses of lesbian SM. These educational pieces were accompanied by explicitly informational pieces, including reprinting of the lesbian hanky code from WCIYH, a full-length article on safety

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<sup>70</sup> “Introduction,” Coming to Power, Samois, 1981, p. 7-14.

specifically for lesbian SMers and reprinting of excerpts from Samois' "Ask Aunt Sadie" newsletter advice column.<sup>71</sup>

The other half of the book is comprised mostly of fiction, though it also includes one academic article written by Gayle Rubin, entitled the "Leather Menace," which discusses the problem of SM as a political issue and one poem. The remaining ten pieces represent a wide range of topics and writing styles, including two science-fiction articles. Five of the stories were fictional fantasies, including a 27-page excerpt from a longer story by Pat Califia, entitled, "Jessie," and 6-page short story, "Girl Gang," that described the gang "rape" of one woman by a group of Leatherdykes at a local bar. The other three fictional pieces stand out because in one way or another, they each explicitly focus on highlighting the centrality of trust and consent to lesbian SM, and in that way, connect deeply to the political project of the book. The last piece included in the volume brings all of these together. "Passion Play," by Martha Alexander, is 15-page story about two academics who engage in a scene that involves humiliation, forced feminization, puppy-play and discipline, but one that also highlighted the couple's long-standing emotional intimacy and the centrality of consent, trust and emotional catharsis to their SM. Ironically poignant is the backdrop of the story, that the scene takes place shortly after Meg, the masochistic bottom, returned from the National Women's Studies Conference to present a paper entitled, "The Redefinition of Community as a Trend Toward Exclusion." Significantly, when the scene has ended and the couple is engaged in post-coitus physical and emotional embrace, Meg utters, "I'm *so* glad to be here." Apparently, so too, were the members of Samois because this is how they chose to close *Coming to Power*. The story was followed only by a small imprint on the inside of the back cover—

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<sup>71</sup> Samois, *Coming to Power*, (Palo Alto: Up Press, 1981).

a reprinting of Samois's "Who We Are" statement used in WCIYH and other group information—a testament to their continued work of community outreach.<sup>72</sup>

Even amidst all these outreach projects, Samois focused a fair amount attention on the sexual pleasure and education of its membership. Surprisingly, this too was subject to much debate and discussion. Shortly after their first meeting, even before the group was named, they held a play party at a private house.<sup>73</sup> A play party is "a social gathering where S/M activities take place"<sup>74</sup> and this particular one has between 18 and 20 women in attendance, with "two bedrooms available" and Dossie was "very busy" between beating one young, blindfolded woman and being fisted in the living room.<sup>75</sup> There were two other play parties between June 1978 and June 1979 when "The Fourth Women's S/M Party" was advertised in the nascent Samois newsletter. The event was planned for June 1<sup>st</sup> at the legendary Catacombs, "primarily a place for gay male fisting parties."<sup>76</sup> There were fewer than twenty women in attendance, which apparently disappointed the group.

Perhaps the low turnout was part of the reason that Samois' sponsorship of play parties was raised as an issue at a business meeting in June 1979. At that meeting, "a decision was made that Samois would no longer sponsor parties which included sexual activity." The decision arose for a number of reasons, including "the crazy sex laws ... [and not wanting] to give new members or the women's community the impression that participation in group sex is an integral part of our group." The organization also

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Califia in *Coming to Power*, 250.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Moser, "A Glossary of Terms Used by Sexual Minorities," reproduced from *San Francisco Medicine*, Volume 71, No. 10 November/December 1998. <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/GESUND/ARCHIV/moser3.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> Dossie Easton, interview with author, March 20, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," May 1979; Rubin, in *Drummer*, 29.

decided to quash the sponsored parties “because of lack of consensus about appropriate party behavior.” After explaining that at least two women were planning private parties, the group clarified their position further, “We want to emphasize that all different kinds and levels of involvement with s/m exist within Samois, and that as long as your trip is consensual, we support it.” Addressing apparently growing concerns regarding hierarchies, the group continued, “No particular kind of s/m is inherently better than any other. By making group activity available to lesbians, we hope we have not given anyone the impression that this is the best or ultimate kind of lesbian s/m.” This statement highlights an ongoing debate over the place of sexual activity within group meetings and activities. However, there continued to be a general consensus that SM related sexual education was an important part of Samois’ existence as the April program meeting was dedicated to “Anal Sex and Fist-Fucking” and May offered “Interactions Between Tops and Bottoms.”<sup>77</sup> In 1980 alone, Samois offered workshops on the following topics: whipping, bondage equipment show and tell, coming out S/M, Getting Heavier, erotic readings, “Ask the Doctor,” Topping 101 and Humiliation. The next year proved equally informative, with workshops including a fashion show, whipping, humiliation, sexual minorities, playing heavy, and tit torture.<sup>78</sup>

Samois also supported members’ sexual lives through the use of print media.

Its initial publication, What Colour is Your Handkerchief included a list of local Bay Area stores that sold leather and rubber goods produced by the Society of Janus where interested women could find SM props, a “Lesbian-Feminist Guide to the Literature on Sadomasochism,” and the “Handkerchief Color Code for Lesbians.” Samois borrowed

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<sup>77</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” April-June, 1979.

<sup>78</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” 1979-1982.



this code from gay men who wore a particular colored handkerchief (to designate the desired activity such as bondage, fist-fucking or piercing) in either the right or left pocket (to designate desired role as bottom or top, respectively) to attract a partner of the “opposite” role interested in the same activity. Samois adapted the code, however, to include activities specific to lesbians, such as breast fondling and “Likes menstruating women.” On the same page as the code an advertisement appeared offering wallet-sized cards sold by Samois for a quarter and explaining that “Non-S/M lesbians may find the hanky is a useful aid to their cruising, also.”<sup>79</sup> While this information was available to those who purchased the booklet, Samois’ newsletters from June 1981 on also regularly included erotica for its membership’s titillation and personal ads so women could find other women interested in particular SM roles or activities.

While there was consensus that sexual pleasure and education was central to Samois, there were disagreements about a number of aspects of this priority. The issue was addressed in the Samois newsletter in July 1979 when members were reminded to “look in the Samois brochure” to “see that we have a rule forbidding drugs or overt sex at meetings.”<sup>80</sup> The rules section of their later Organizational Structure document went on to explain that there had been “a policy which required that there be no sex at meetings. However,” they continued, “this policy proved very difficult to interpret and enforce ... Therefore, we have dropped this policy, and substituted for it the simple statement that Samois is not an introduction service or a sex club.” That it was not a sex club seems

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<sup>79</sup> Samois, *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, 36-44.

<sup>80</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” July 1979, p. 2 In addition to sex, drug use seems to have been a large concern as the newspaper reported that “Some members have been uncomfortable at a couple of meetings because of the presence of controlled substances.” Later, Samois’ second rule of their official Organizational Structure was “No drugs (including alcohol) at meetings other than potlucks and socials.” While outside of the purview of this particular study, it would be interesting to investigate this further.

reasonable and justified, but given their statement of purpose which included the explicit focus of making it “possible for women who are interested in lesbian S/M to find each other” and the fact that the newsletters regularly ran personal ads, the claim that they are “not an introduction service,” was a bit contradictory.

Differences of opinion about what was considered acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior also developed. The issue of an emerging hierarchy of sexual behavior had been alluded to earlier, but was directly addressed in an August 1980 letter to the advice columnist. The letter connected the hierarchy issue to the growing level of SM-related injuries that were occurring among club members. The author explained that while their were “spoken messages ... of safety, consent, mutuality, and the right of everyone to practice S/M in the way that suits her fantasies and desires. The hidden messages emphasize competition and performance, reputation and status.” She theorized that “in an effort to fit the image of being a ‘good’ top or bottom, members are pushing themselves and their partners beyond what common sense or their own desires may dictate.”<sup>81</sup>

Safe sexual practices also took center stage in the February 1981 newsletter with Pat Califia’s plea for safety among Samois members. The March newsletter then included a notice that five members had contracted hepatitis and, thus, some women participating in the last women’s play party at the Catacombs were likely contagious. This was followed by an explanation of how one might become infected and what the recommended course of action was if infected. It is significant that the group discussed

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<sup>81</sup> “Organizational Structure of Samois,” no date, p. 6; Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” August 1980, p. 4-5. There was no printed responses to this letter, though this may be explained by the lack of a full newsletter the following month and the attention to other ongoing controversies with outside groups and publications in subsequent months.

such matters as drug use and disease so openly in their newsletter, which indicates members trusted each other to not share this information with either authorities or outsiders.<sup>82</sup> Samois' concerns about sexual safety were not limited to physical well-being but emotional as well. Late in 1981 and into 1982, there was a long debate, part of it published in the newsletter, regarding the acceptability of scenes that re-enacted Nazi/prisoner power dynamics and how such scenes might be psychologically damaging to those directly involved and even those who witnessed such actions. There is no clear resolution to any of these issues, though they point to some serious underlying divisions within the community.

While significant, the conflicts about sex were only partly responsible for the group's dissolution. In a letter dated April 15, 1982 and signed by 24 women, members of Samois outlined thirteen "specific reason for our discomfort," three of which were directly related to the book project, particularly the accounting of loans used to produce it, and "overly harsh criticism" and "disrespect for the group who put out [the book]."<sup>83</sup> The letter signers also decried a lack "of real welcoming of new members – instead, a feeling of competitive-ness and elitism," underscoring the aforementioned issues around SM hierarchy. Signatories also highlighted "unfair and unkind handling" of a situation in which a member was censured for violating the club's privacy policy, the "acceptance of having men participate in Samois program meetings," and the "inaccurate, overgeneralized and judgmental use of the 'separatist' at meetings and in the newsletter, often as an (incorrect) synonym for Lesbian." Their concern about Samois'

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<sup>82</sup> Samois, "SAMOIS NEWSLETTER," February 1981, p. 3 & March 1981, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Alyx, Arlene, Cathy S, et al, "Dear Members of Samois," April 15, 1982, in Issues files of Samois Archive, GLBTHS. This letter is taken up again later in this chapter, as part of the discussion of the group's dissolution.

“[u]nwillingness to take a political stance on anti-Semitism, specifically in terms of how this issue affects the membership,” and “[l]ack of day-to-day sensitivity around class issues” point to political differences among members.<sup>84</sup> In addition to these increasingly evident issues, there were others that indicate growing tensions between individuals and/or groups within Samoia. Of particular interest is the first of the thirteen points, which charged that there was a “consistently [sic] high level of paranoia, tension, anxiety and accusatory behavior between individuals and sub-groups within the organizations ... Women who align themselves primarily with the non-Lesbian S/M community showing a continued lack of tolerance towards the needs and priorities of other women in the group.”<sup>85</sup> Other than a re-printing of *Coming to Power* in the fall of 1982, the only evidence that Samoia existed beyond March of that year is a singular flyer for a “Lesbian Pride Leather Dance.” It is unclear from existing records exactly when, how and under what circumstances Samoia was dissolved, but it is clear that it was sometime in late 1982 or early 1983.

While Samoia appears to have imploded due to internal issues, the group’s impact on the local, national and international level was still significant. What Colour is Your Handkerchief was generally well received, supporting Samoia’s theory that there were

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<sup>84</sup> Alyx, Arlene, Cathy S, et al, “Dear Members of Samoia,” April 15, 1982, in Issues files of Samoia Archive, GLBTHS.

<sup>85</sup> While this statement does not levy charges against particular people or sub-groups, two of the claims do make reference to specific individuals. The first raised the issue of “Lack of limitation placed on the powers of the newsletter editor,” which included “her continuing, regular use of newsletter space to run her own fiction,” the “publication of business meeting minutes that haven’t been approved by officers or other members,” and the that the newsletter was “becoming more of a vehicle for the editor’s own commentary and writings, than a forum for all members.” It is significant that at this time, the newsletter was Pat Califia, and that she was the only editor to include a byline to the newsletter and that under Califia, the newsletter became much more robust, including the reprinting of various articles, etc. This is followed by the critique that the “treasure’s lack of accountability and communication to those who loaned money for *Coming to Power*.” While the individuals in question are unnamed in the letter itself, it is reasonable to assert that everyone involved knew who these women were and that this would be read as a critique of them as individuals. Alyx, Arlene, Cathy S, et al, “Dear Members of Samoia,” April 15, 1982.

many women who were interested in learning about sado-masochism. According to the group's records, two hundred copies sold between June and September 1979, when a second printing provided two hundred more. In October 1979, the group reported that the booklet would "soon be on sale at stores in New York, Oregon, Massachusetts, Michigan and Arizona. And Alaska too!" The following month the Samoïs co-coordinator reported, "One of the best parts [of the job] is getting to read the appreciative letters that come in from all over the country." She suggested that members contact her if they were interested in corresponding with women from other places as she reported, "WOMEN ARE HUNGRY TO HEAR FROM US TOO." (emphasis original) This was followed by an excerpt of one of the letters received in which the reader explained that since reading What Colour she had "allowed [herself] to listen to what I want/need" and was "dealing with the guilt that comes along with S/M." The letter writer also noted that "Due to the extreme suppression of lesbian S/M sexuality, I have very little information on S/M technique. I would turn to other sources (writings) on S/M but I have a hard time getting through the hetero-sexist shit."<sup>86</sup>

Another woman wrote Plexus (a Bay Area feminist publication) in late 1979, stating that she thought "the women in Samoïs have been very brave to publish this book, and to support them for doing so." Samoïs reprinted the letter in their December newsletter and another letter of support in May 1980 in which the author explained that she was "a lesbian currently living in Hawaii" and that she had recently come across What Colour and was enclosing a money order for a copy to take back to New Zealand. She commented that she particularly enjoyed the humor which she felt "sometimes sadly lacking in the austerity of our intense quest for sound ideology and gyosophic

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<sup>86</sup> Samoïs "SAMOÏS NEWSLETTER," June-Nov, 1979.

‘rightness’.” She asked for input on her ponderings about “the ethno-cultural significance” of her previous SM liaisons as a Maori woman in power-based relationships with Caucasian women before asking if she could subscribe to the group’s newsletter. Finally, she declared “How neat to know that a group such as yours has finally surfaced.” Further evidence that Samois’ message was reaching a wide audience came in the June 1980 newsletter when the group reported that a third run of 500 copies of What Colour is Your Handkerchief had sold out and a fourth printing was planned. In October 1980, the group announced their intention to start a national newsletter, but this was apparently set aside when Samois shifted its focus exclusively to its new book project.<sup>87</sup>

Through What Colour is Your Handkerchief as well as the institutional conflicts with other feminist organizations, Samois gained local, national and even international attention for its work. While some of that attention was negative, much of it was positive. The variety of letters expressing gratitude for What Colour were followed by other letters of support for the group, including one in September 1981 from a woman in New York City and opened with the words, “This is a love letter.” The writer went on to explain how critical Samois’ existence had been to her journey towards self-acceptance. She closed saying, “I am grateful that Samois was here when i needed you all. I am even more grateful that you gave me the space to find my own way, the time i needed to process. Indeed, i love you for being Lesbian-feminists who do s/m.”<sup>88</sup> These letters of support were joined by others from around the globe, including a group of SM women organizing in the Netherlands, and individuals in Poland, London and Canada.<sup>89</sup> In

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<sup>87</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Dec 1979- Oct 1980.

<sup>88</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” Sept. 1981.

<sup>89</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” June 1980 & May 1981. Some of these were specific responses to Janet Schrim regarding an article she had written.

addition to an international response, American women also responded enthusiastically. The group noted that at the 1980 Gay Day parade they “saw lots of women in leather that day, women we had never seen around SAMOIS.” In December that year, the group reported that at recent meeting, 30 new women turned up at a recent meeting, one explaining that she “came from Montana when I heard this meeting was going to happen.”<sup>90</sup> Clearly, there were women in many parts of the country and across the world that were interested in exploring and understanding lesbian SM, particularly within a feminist analysis. Samois’ organizing had had a profound impact on a wide range of women’s ability to do so.

In a period of four short years, Samois had not only created a unique poli-socio-sexual community, they also helped increase the visibility and understanding of lesbian SM. For interested women, the organization came to represent the possibility of sexual liberation, but for feminists opposed SM, Samois was a painful thorn in their side, both theoretically and practically. The last historical record of Samois’ existence appears shortly before the now infamous Barnard Sex Conference, when controversy over sexual practices dramatically and publically took center stage in the national feminist discussion. But to understand that event and its effects of on feminist politics, discussed at length in Chapter Four, we must first better understand the perspectives of lesbian SM held by those outside Samois.

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<sup>90</sup> Samois, “SAMOIS NEWSLETTER,” July 1980, p. 3 & December 1980, p. 2.

## Chapter Three

### “Feminism meets Fist-Fucking”

#### The intensification of the lesbian SM debate 1978-1982

Between 1978 and 1982, during Samois' brief existence, the debate regarding sado-masochism's proper relationship to feminism deepened and expanded as the issue moved from the periphery to the center of feminist discussions. Across America, anti-pornography groups organized actions to protest media they labeled oppressive toward women, frequently citing sado-masochistic imagery as the worst offender. Simultaneously, in response, small groups of women began gathering to support each other in their interest in and to educate each other about sado-masochism. Meanwhile, the debate in the feminist press continued, as activists on both sides multiplied and interested onlookers responded. By 1980, there was a clear set of assumptions employed by those on all sides of the debate<sup>1</sup> which intensified as oppositional responses to lesbian-SM became increasingly personal and emotional. As women with specifically anti-lesbian-SM views delineated themselves from the broader anti-pornography and feminist movements, increased polarization on the topic meant that the limited dialogues occurring during the 1970s were largely replaced by dichotomous “pro” and “anti” rhetoric. By 1982, lesbian sado-masochism had become one of the watershed topics among second wave feminists as most spokewomen and almost all of the major publications had taken a clear stand on the issue. This development not only illustrates the centrality of the issue of feminist sexuality to the movement as a whole but also highlights the problem of difference within the feminist community. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> The assumptions shared by pro-SM lesbians were largely discussed in Chapter 2, so this Chapter focuses mainly on illuminating the shared assumptions of those who were critical of lesbian SM.



between 1978 and 1982, the “sex debate” became one of the most divisive issues in the second wave. Three fairly distinct positions set the stage for the explosive Barnard conference in April 1982 and in doing so profoundly affected the course of the larger movements for gay/lesbian and women’s rights.

In November 1978, the national feminist magazine Ms. published a series of articles articulating the difference between “Erotica and Pornography” and offering instructions on “How to run the pornographers out of town.” An additional piece entitled “What do you think is erotic? 10 women explain what turns them on” presented a series of vignettes in which women from different walks of life and varying degrees of feminist fame responded to that provocative question. Six of the ten women discussed pornography, five using it as a benchmark of what did not excite or attract them sexually. Some of these women went on to explain what did actually turn them on, but most offered largely abstract discussions of what they found sensual rather than explicit expressions of what they desired sexually and/or what made them feel such desire.<sup>2</sup>

For example, Alice Walker expounded on her erotic relationship with jazz after her critique of a piece of fiction she found both erotic and pornographic. Another woman wrote a laundry list of what she did not like, including such things as “sex totally out of context and without attachment (such as in porno films or in rape)” and “genital-preoccupied sex.” After the “no” list, she included a much shorter list of what *did* turn her on—which was essentially a monogamous relationship with an economically secure, highly educated man. Inside that relationship, she continued, she liked “almost anything at all said during the act itself”—leaving the reader to assume, based on her earlier assertions, that her partner is not discussing leaving his job, other girls or how porn

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<sup>2</sup> “What do you think is erotic? 10 women explains what turns them on ...” *Ms.*, November 1978, 56-7.

excites him. Also unable to name her desire, another woman sadly and sarcastically explained, “I haven’t thought about erotica since I began having to think about money.”<sup>3</sup> These women, who were asked explicitly to discuss desire, instead intellectualized, philosophized and joked their way into silence about their sexuality.

That many of these women expressed their sexual desires in relation to pornography highlights an important consensus within the feminist community by the late 1970s: pornography was a source of women’s oppression which necessitated serious feminist activism. Indeed, the same month the *Ms.* articles were published, WAVPM held “the first feminist conference on pornography.”<sup>4</sup> This conference formalized the newest campaign of the second wave, which, since the 1976 “Snuff” protests, had focused feminist attention and activity on the degradation of women via the pornography industry. In addition to movie and billboard protests, other highlights of the nascent campaign included Take Back the Night marches, “browse-ins at ‘adult’ bookstores” and speakouts across the country.<sup>5</sup> While this new anti-violence/anti-porn campaign highlighted some significant issues and allowed veterans of sexual abuse and rape to “come out,” it also had a powerful and less positive effect on the slowly building discussion of lesbian sado-masochism. Those who focused on the link between pornography and violence against women were especially strident in their denunciations of lesbian SM.

The endemic equation of sadomasochism with pornography and both of these with actual violence against women appeared regularly in the writings and speeches of

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<sup>3</sup> “What do you think is erotic? 10 women explains what turns them on ...”, 56-57.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay Van Gelder, “When Women Confront Street Porn,” *Ms.*, February 1980, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Van Gelder, 64.

anti-pornography leaders. In their attempts to raise consciousness, anti-pornographers of the time often employed laundry lists of images, many of which incorporated a critique of anything vaguely sadomasochistic and labeled it anti-feminist. In her *Ms.* article, “Erotica and Pornography, A Clear and Present Difference” Gloria Steinem challenged readers to “look at any depiction of sex in which there is clear force ... [i]t may be very blatant, with weapons of torture or bondage.” This, she continued, was “sex being used to ... tell us the lie that pain and humiliation (ours or someone else’s) are really the same as pleasure.”<sup>6</sup> Steinem, like other anti-porn activists, explicitly connected sadomasochistic sexual pleasure to actual violence, but also argued that such masochistic pleasure could not be real. This kind of associative logic appears throughout the anti-pornographers’ rhetoric of the period. Another frequent connection was made between images labeled pornography and actual violence against women. For example, at WAVPM’s November 1978 conference, one presenter offered “an analysis of the elements of pornography” along with a slide show and a set of statistics intended to demonstrate its effects. The statistics she offered, while disturbing, had very little explicit connection to pornography. She cited, for example, rape, battery and child abuse statistics (some of them questionable in and of themselves) as though these acts of violence were clearly and undeniably related to the existence of pornography. This porn-equals-violent behavior assumption was made by many inside the anti-pornography movement and was supported through the slideshows like the one offered by WAVPM.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria Steinem, “Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference” *Ms.*, November 1978, 54. It should be noted that Steinem was not one of the avid anti-pornography activists, thus her stance indicates the ubiquitous nature of the anti-porn feminist position.

<sup>7</sup> brooke, “life, liberty, & the pursuit of porn,” *off our backs*, vol. 9, issue 1, (January 1979): 5.

As the anti-porn movement became more public in their claims, Samois attempted to challenge some of its assumptions. After the November WAVPM conference, Samois wrote, asking for a screening of the slideshow, which Califia claimed WAVPM declined because they believed that Samois “glamourized violence against women” and were afraid that they “would find the slideshow erotic.” Yet, somehow, Samois members gained access to the slideshow. According to Califia, “As more and more members of Samois saw this slideshow, more and more anger accumulated.” “They did not like their sexuality as lesbians being equated with anything male or patriarchal. Others were angry because we liked some pornography and didn’t want to see all of it wiped out.” She continued, “All of us felt that the picture presented of S/M was biased and distorted.”<sup>8</sup>

Given the centrality of SM to WAVPM’s critique of pornography, it is surprising that the official conference report does not mention the controversy in general or lesbian sad-masochism in particular. In fact, the only disapproval of anything sado-masochistic appears in the first conference resolution in which the group resolved to “eliminate all images of women being bound ... for male sexual stimulation.”<sup>9</sup> Given the woman-focused and largely lesbian membership of Samois, it seems unlikely that many of them would have found denying men’s sexual pleasure problematic. Nowhere else in any official report of the conference do the organizers address the issue of sado-masochism. Perhaps Califia’s largely negative critique of the conference and slide show was a personal one, based on the fact that she was excluded from the event. She was not only

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<sup>8</sup> Pat Califia, “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco,” in *Coming to Power*, Third Edition (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 255-257. It was at this point that Samois again requested a meeting with WAVPM. After discussing it at their April 1979 meeting, WAVPM again delayed the joint discussion, according to Samois’ newsletter, because “they were too busy.”

<sup>9</sup> Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, “Resolutions,” *Newspage*, (February 1979): 4.

denied the opportunity to present a workshop on behalf of Samois, but also denied registration to the conference as a member of the press.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Califia's personal reaction to being denied access paralleled Samois' institutional reaction to WAVPM over the next few years, which was often marked by defensiveness, bordering at times on paranoia. While in retrospect, this response seems like an over-reaction, it is also important to understand that Samois' analysis of WAVPM was based on anti-pornographers' often faulty assertions about and scathing judgments of sado-masochism as well as the organization's public actions. For example, WAVPM engaged in or planned protests of screenings of *The Story of O* across the country. The first outlined the successful campaign by Rochester (New York) Women Against Violence Against Women against a showing of the film at the University of Rochester. Twenty-five women used various forms of protest, including leaflets, chanting and apparently a bomb-threat at the University. Another article reported a similarly successful protest, involving hundreds, in Sacramento, California. A third article outlined a planned action against the movie in Berkeley organized by WAVPM. While none of the protests specifically address Samois, its membership or its agenda, it is important to note that the SM group had chosen its name "because it evokes ... the figure of a lesbian dominatrix in *Story of O*." That the membership of Samois took such protests personally, even if the insult was unintended, seems reasonable.<sup>11</sup>

Attempts by lesbian sadomasochists to confront the assumptions of local anti-porn activists faced another challenge when one of the conference organizers moved "East to

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<sup>10</sup> Correspondence between WAVPM and *Lesbian Tide*, Nov-Dec 1978, in Box 6, "Lesbian Tide Correspondence" of WAVPM archive at GLBTHS.

<sup>11</sup> Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, "Post Conference Actions," *Newspage*, (February 1979): 10; Samois, "Our Statement," *What Color Is Your Handkerchief*, (June, 1979): p. 4.

coordinate a campaign in New York, the nation's media capital and nerve center of national billion-dollar pornography industry." By the fall of 1979, the group Women Against Pornography "had organized regular tours, a 7,000-person march through Times Square, and a weekend conference." The conference, held in September 1979, offered participants dozens of workshops as well as tours, slide shows and documentaries. About 800 women attended, and according to one source, "some 35 percent of them were women who had not previously been active in the Movement."<sup>12</sup>

*Off our backs* coverage of an audience speakout at an East Coast Women Against Pornography conference in September of the following year echoed the growing assertion of porn-equals-violence. One example of this was a young woman who "babysat for a family. The father had lots of porn mags and would sit flipping through them. One day flipping through wasn't enough—he raped her."<sup>13</sup> While the fact that this woman was raped is, of course, reprehensible, the assumed connection between the use of pornography and this act of violence speaks to a larger trend in anti-porn theorizing and activism: coincidence was assumed to be causation. Yet, when challenged on this very assumption, whether both feminists or non-feminists, anti-pornographers often attacked the questioner as sexist or misogynistic. Thus the position came down to "we just know its true, we don't have to prove it."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these SM=porn=violence equations, anti-pornographers built their case on a number of other assumptions related to the nature of the sexes and their relationship to one another. In a public speech, Andrea Dworkin, proclaiming of the evils

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<sup>12</sup> Van Gelder, 64-66.

<sup>13</sup> brooke, "feminist conference: porn again," *off our backs*, vol. 9, issue 10, (November 1979): 24

<sup>14</sup> brooke, "life, liberty, & the pursuit of porn," *off our backs*, vol. 9, issue 1, (January 1979): 5; brooke, "feminist conference: porn again," 24; dworkin, andrea, "speech exhorts march," *off our backs*, vol. 9, issue 1, (January 1979): 4.; Steinem in *Ms.*, November 1978, 54.

of porn, informed her audience that “Pornography exists because men despise women,”<sup>15</sup> making explicit the underlying assumption of many such radical feminists that men, as a class, had a simple and adversarial relationship with women, as a class. This assumption also supported another commonly held and articulated belief that Robin Morgan so eloquently repeats twice in “What Do Our Masochistic Fantasies Really Mean?”: “In patriarchy, men have power and women are powerless.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that Morgan did not contend that women have less power than men, or limited power or agency. Rather, she and her contemporaries believed and regularly asserted that, in a patriarchal society women are power-LESS.

Not only did anti-pornographers make questionable assumptions about women and men as classes of people, they made similar assumptions about male and female sexualities. Anti-pornographers regularly contended that all men eroticize power (which they refer to as dominance and submission) and in doing so, implied that eroticization of this power was strictly the domain of men. For example, in a “speech delivered January 28, 1981 in New York City at the storefront headquarters of Women Against Pornography,” John Stoltenberg asserted, “Sadism constructs the sensation of male gender membership like nobody’s business.”<sup>17</sup> These assumptions about the nature of sadomasochistic sexuality as inherently male also hints at other assumptions about sexuality. This assumed male sexuality is not only based on the sexist abuse of power but assumed that sexuality is immutable and fixed, at least for men. However, this assumption directly contradicts at least one radical feminist’s assertion that “there is no

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<sup>15</sup> dworkin, in *off our backs*, January 1979, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, Robin, “What do our Masochistic Fantasies Really Mean?” *Ms.*, June 1977, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Stoltenberg, John, “Male Sexuality and Sadomasochism,” p. 7, Folder 239, Box 5, Women Against Pornography Collection, 90-M153, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

real sexuality, no human sexuality beyond culture. Human sexuality,” the founder of WAP continued, “is a cultural construct that is rooted in and expresses the values of a particular culture.”<sup>18</sup> Bringing these two ideas together, it becomes clear that many feminists believed that male sexuality was inherently violent because American culture valued violence in men, which was then manifested in their behavior.

At the same time, using this logic, women could not eroticize power unless as a by-product of internalized patriarchal norms. In one critique of Samois’ *Coming to Power*, the author claimed that the dominant women in the scene are allowed access to such unchecked power “because within the context of the sexual encounters they are not female; they are substitute men.”<sup>19</sup> Not only do anti-pornographers deny women access to a desire for power, they do so by transforming sadistic women into men, illustrating the feminist consensus that the nature of woman was non-aggressive. Nor was this denial of eroticization of power limited to women whose proclivities were inclined solely toward sadism.

Throughout anti-pornography and anti-SM discussions, masochists are referred as unwitting victims who, almost without agency, participate in their own oppression and the re-creation of patriarchal norms. In her response to the question of what turned her on, Andrea Dworkin, who later formed a political coalition with radical right anti-feminists to censor pornography, explained, “When I’m feeling very powerless, very humiliated, I regress and have sexual feelings about cruel men. Women experience so much sadomasochism that it becomes the only way we can come to sexuality.”<sup>20</sup> Here Dworkin articulated, as others do throughout the “Sex Wars,” that women who had sado-

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<sup>18</sup> Chendor, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Chendor, 9A.

<sup>20</sup> “What do you think is erotic?” p. 57.



masochistic desires had simply internalized patriarchal notions of sex and were re-creating sexist paradigms in their bedrooms. Robin Morgan also worked from this commonly held assumption in her article, “What do our masochistic fantasies really mean?” In it, she theorizes that female masochism is an elaborate ruse that women use to find sexual satisfaction in a patriarchal society. Gloria Steinem echoed these ideas when she wrote, “Yes, it’s true that there are women who have been forced by violent families and dominating men to confuse love with pain; so much so that they have become masochists.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, another writer in *Ms.* magazine theorized, “Masochism springs out of a sense of inadequacy so great one yearns for a redeemer, attributing to a stronger person superhuman powers and yielding every right over oneself. Masochism is a kind of spellbound, childlike dependency.”<sup>22</sup> In explaining masochism in this way, these feminists denied masochistic women any agency or expertise over their own bodies and desires. While each of the authors cited examples of heterosexual female masochism, anti-pornographers contended that lesbian sadomasochism was no different, itself merely a carbon copy of patriarchal, repressive sex since masochism could never be an authentic, healthy sexuality for straight women or lesbians.<sup>23</sup>

While it is significant that many major feminist figures and publications held these assumptions, others shared their views of women’s sexuality in general and their critique of SM in particular. Anonymous from Colchester, Vermont wrote to the Lesbian Connection and, despite her confessed lack of connection to the lesbian SM movement

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<sup>21</sup> Steinem, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Hendin, Josephine, “Problems of Intimacy: Will we go from vulnerability to violence?” *Ms.*, November 1976, 68.

<sup>23</sup> For examples, please see, Chendor’s letters, *Against Sadomasochism* and Anonymous from Colchester’s letters to Lesbian Connection.

(and apparent lack of connection to the anti-porn movement), wanted to voice her concerns. She explained,

I trust us to question and work on forming a culture and communities that are more woman-focused, more spirited with woman energy. But I don't trust that we don't have many things inside ... which need to be changed, purged, thrown out. It is history that men have connected violence, power and sex. I think that S&M is an extension of this same reality, and I want to talk seriously with other lesbian feminists about why it has invaded our womanlove, and whether this is actually an issue we can ignore in the interest of 'individual freedom.

Anonymous echoed earlier assertions that violence is a male creation and the connection between it and sex is purely male in its nature. She also conflated SM with violence (rather than an erotic expression or fun pastime) and therefore viewed it as a male creation that invades women rather than an act that women embraced of their own volition.<sup>24</sup> Anonymous made these assumptions even more explicit, writing, "I am not so much shocked that woman could do this, but I am brutally reminded how strong the enemy is and how sick and misogynous his ideas are." As in other feminist critiques of the time, Anonymous asserted that women who engage in SM do so because of the overwhelming power of the patriarchal system and assumed that SM cannot be an authentically female experience because women, in her mind, are inherently non-violent. Anonymous' assumptions about women led her to conclude that female sexuality could and should be different from what she assumes to be the norm: "I want woman to give up power roles in our sexuality, not to strive to get excitement from emphasizing a power dynamic in lovemaking." Then, like others of the time, Anonymous tied SM back to heterosexuality, "And is there not a sex role imitation in S&M also—male aggressor, woman receptor?" If so then "real" lesbians should clearly reject the practice.

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<sup>24</sup> Anonymous from Colchester, "About S&M – Some Feedback, Please," *Lesbian Connection* (November 1979): 3-4.

Anonymous, who claimed little knowledge of the tension in the feminist community regarding SM, voiced many ideas held by both anti-pornographers and other SM detractors, which highlights the strength of these shared concerns and assumptions.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, not all feminists, even those sympathetic to the agenda of the anti-pornography movement accepted these assumptions at face value. One author, writing an article for Ms., articulated a number of concerns about Women Against Pornography's presentations. "[W]hat especially bothered" her was what she "perceived to be the group's frequent failure to address the complexities of sexuality and sexual fantasy." More specifically, she worried that since she knew "plenty of women who like porn," the "current feminist analysis has no credibility with these women, who can legitimately conclude out of their own experience that porn is harmless." Furthermore, she posited "[b]eing labeled as brainwashed degenerates (by feminists, yet) can push women right back into the closet of sexual guilt." She concluded that it was "crucial that we aren't tempted into expedient oversimplification or overstatement... to protect our own multiplicity of issues, backgrounds, and experiences as women."<sup>26</sup>

Another challenge to critics of SM appeared in an article by Mariana Valverde, "Feminism meets fist-fucking: getting lost in lesbian S&M." The article appeared on the "The Back Page" a feature in The Body Politic, a feminist journal from Toronto, Canada. While initially Valverde asserted, "no feminist would seriously argue that the acting out of [SM] fantasies would be a liberating experience,"<sup>27</sup> it quickly became clear that Valverde was still conflicted about SM. She asserted, "Women's sexuality is constantly

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<sup>25</sup> Anonymous from Colchester, in *Lesbian Connection* 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Van Gelder, 66-67.

<sup>27</sup> Mariana Valverde, "Feminism meets fist-fucking: getting lost in lesbian S&M," *The Body Politic*, (February 1980): 43-44. I know I need to get more background information on this publication. I am going to contact Valverde.

expanding, and it now seems to have reached a new frontier....” She then pondered, “is this expansion the liberation of previously repressed desires, or is it the compulsive and endless *production* of desire? Ever-new forms of eroticism ... is this not too much like the production of ever more bizarre commodities characteristic of consumer capitalism?” Valverde made a fascinating connection between the rise in interest in SM and the market economy, suggesting that critics of SM needed to look at the seemingly universal system of patriarchy.<sup>28</sup>

But Valverde moved beyond Marxist critiques of consumer capitalism to explore more theoretical ponderings about feminism’s relationship women’s sexuality. First, she stated that feminism meant respecting women’s experience and that it included “thinking about sex with as open an attitude as possible.” Yet, Valverde did not advocate an “anything goes” approach, either. As she explained, “There is a danger of overdoing one’s feminist tolerance and shrugging one’s shoulders saying, ‘Well, it takes all kinds,’ which hardly advances feminist thought.”<sup>29</sup> Valverde contends that “honest and sincere” exploration of sexuality did not necessarily define something as appropriate, using the example of male use of pornography to illustrate her point. Valverde then concluded:

The time is ripe for realizing that the endless production of sexual images and sexual practices is neither completely regressive (as the guardians of morality would have it) nor is it completely progressive (as certain advocates of ‘sexual liberation’ would have it). ... [T]here will always be yet another frontier, yet more shocking sex acts, and when faced with this sea of endlessly collapsing barriers we must stop to ask: Liberation for what?

She thus returned to the idea of endless desire, endless pursuit and pondered SM’s connection to a liberation agenda.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Valverde, 43-44.

<sup>29</sup> Valverde, 43-44.

<sup>30</sup> Valverde, 43-44.

Valverde's final argument took yet another interesting turn. She first tied the nature of SM fantasies back to the power of the patriarchy, assuming it to be the well-spring of sadomasochistic desire. In this way, she focused again on the heart of the problem—the seemingly endless expansion of sexuality, as demonstrated by SM, and specifically by Samois' hanky code. Addressing the hanky code, Valverde agreed that exploring sexuality may free some women from previously held assumptions about love and its connection to some romantic notion of happiness, but cautioned lesbians to avoid such exploration of sexuality, but not because they were wrong or bad, or even unfeminist. Rather, she cautioned that if lesbians engaged in these alternative sexual practices they will become obsessed with orgasm and may become sexual automatons (thereby negating any sense of freedom or liberty). By illuminating the connections between sexuality and the market economy and making parallels between the pursuit of sexual pleasure and 'keeping up with the Joneses,' Valverde, unlike most other feminist critiques of SM, does not rest her claims on assumptions about women's innate goodness, their victimhood vis-à-vis the patriarchy and/or some ideal female sexuality based solely in emotional, romantic connections.<sup>31</sup>

Valverde's critique and the questions she and other feminists raised regarding the nature of feminism and SM faded away in the next few years as the sex war headed into full combat. Unfortunately, the fascinating theoretical explorations and questions Valverde posed got pushed aside as the adversaries closed ranks over the next year and a half and the mud-slinging began. Sadly, there was no meaningful response to Valverde's nuanced analyses.<sup>32</sup> As the debate became more passionate and personal, the lines

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<sup>31</sup> Valverde, 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> Valverde, 43-44. I need to make sure this was true (that there were no responses).

between what was right, feminist and liberated and what was wrong, misogynistic and oppressive became harder to see and the positions claimed by each side turned increasingly dogmatic.

At the same time, pornography and sadomasochism continued to gain traction as significant social issues, not only in the feminist community, but more broadly in American society as well. The April 1980 issue of Mother Jones, a long-running liberal newsmagazine, included an entire section entitled “Sex, Porn and Male Rage,” which offered readers no less than three full-length articles analyzing various forms and effects of pornography along with a multitude of side-bars and other feminist theorizing about these issues. It is interesting, however, to note that none of these articles, which included excerpts from the Marquis de Sade, a report on a Times Square sex store and an analysis of the feminist anti-pornography movement, ever mention lesbian sado-masochism or the tension the issue was causing within feminist and lesbian circles.<sup>33</sup>

The April 1980 edition of The Advocate, on the other hand, offered a good example of this mounting tension. A small article explained that a Philadelphia bookstore was defending itself against cries of sexism by a local branch of Women Against Violence Against Women. The group, like earlier anti-porn groups, had protested the bookstore’s sale of *The Story of O*, claiming that it contributed to violence against women. A representative responded by explaining that the bookstore tried to offer a wide variety of material for a diverse audience and that they were responding to community demand.<sup>34</sup> That issue of The Advocate also included what would become

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<sup>33</sup> “Sex, Porn and Male Rage,” *Mother Jones*, April 1980, 14-62.

<sup>34</sup> “Philly Bookstore Defends Sale of Porn,” *The Advocate* (April 17, 1980): 9.

one of the most controversial publications of the Sex Wars, Pat Califia's "Among Us, Against Us—The New Puritans."

This article marked an important turning point in the debate, as it initiated a series of responses that in turn, solidified the sides in the coming "Sex War." In it, Samois' founding member, Pat Califia expressed rising anxiety and frustration with the anti-pornography movement. The majority of the article was an outright attack, albeit a defensive one from Califia's perspective, against WAVPM. She harshly criticized WAVPM's rhetoric and strategies, calling its "definitions of pornography and violence ... circular and vague." In her scathing critique, Califia labeled the group's "Exaggerations ... a questionable basis for political action" and charged that WAVPM was "basically a group with a right-wing philosophy masquerading as a radical feminist organization." Labeling some of their positions "absurd" and "awful," Califia also criticized WAVPM for its refusal to support other important causes, such as gay rights and abortion, while at the same time becoming increasingly conservative. She claimed "They continue to grow ... more powerful and more pro-censorship and antisex in their positions." Given the derisive tone and the biting content of Califia's article, it is easy to see why members of both WAVPM and the larger anti-pornography movement took offense and responded swiftly.<sup>35</sup>

While the organization did not specifically mention the article, WAVPM responded to Califia's allegations by reworking and reprinting an earlier edition of "Questions We Get Asked Most Often" in their July 1980 newsletter. In the four and a half page article, WAVPM outlined its beliefs about pornography, which included definitions and examples as well as citations of various studies that proved pornography's

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<sup>35</sup> Pat Califia, "Among Us, Against Us—The New Puritans," *The Advocate* (April 17, 1980): 14-18.

connection to actual violence against women. The group also explicitly stated that they had “no objection to explicit sex” nor did they desire censorship, stating that they “never sponsored legislations, pressured police departments, or expected the government to become involved” but rather used “pioneering analysis, consciousness-raising and direct action” to “change the economics and social norms in this country.” Interestingly, while WAVPM included SM imagery among those it found problematic, the group did not directly address the issue of lesbian sado-masochism in any way. Apparently, the leadership had decided to take a “publicly ‘neutral’ stance.”<sup>36</sup>

This neutral stance was unsatisfactory to at least one small group of WAVPM members who decided to organize their own response to the issues at hand. Four women published a double-sided flyer calling for submissions to “Feminist Perspectives on Sadomasochism,” expressing concern that “Sadomasochism has recently emerged as an ‘issue’ in the national women’s community.” Referring specifically to Samois as a “group of so-called lesbian feminists,” the flyer recounted the group’s recent activity, including the production of What Colour is Your Handkerchief and other presentations. They described a variety of press coverage on the topic before declaring, “both within and without the feminist community, there has been confusion and a concerted effort to normalize sadomasochism.” In response to WAVPM’s refusal to act, this group of women “decided to produce a collection of critical writings on women and sadomasochism.” The back side of the flyer explained that they were “interested in receiving manuscripts which [brought] a feminist political and ethical analysis to bear on sadomasochism,” and they offered a list of possible topics including connections between

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<sup>36</sup> WAVPM, “Questions We Get Asked Most Often,” *Newspage*, (July 1980): 1-6; “Feminist Perspectives on Sadomasochism” flyer in “Lesbian S/M” file at Lesbian Herstory Archives.



violence and sadomasochism, scrutiny of “community/media receptivity to lesbian sadomasochism,” and analysis of Samois’ writings. The dispassionate title aside, the tone of the flyer as well as the list of possible topics indicate that these feminists were decidedly anti-SM. And, while it is unclear if this publication was ever completed, Robin Ruth Linden, to whom submissions were to be sent, edited *Against Sado-Masochism* two years later. This flyer appears to have launched that project.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, during the summer and into the fall of 1980, the issue of lesbian sadomasochism was being debated in the pages of two popular feminist publications, Plexus in the Bay Area of California and off our backs in Washington, D.C. The discussion in Plexus began with two articles, one a single woman’s explanation of her experience with lesbian SM, the other an informational article employing long quotes from three Samois members. Both articles portrayed lesbian SM in a very positive light and like previous article of a similar vein, were careful to point how SM was different from violence against women and could be considered a feminist activity. The articles were quickly followed by a long letter, signed by seven women, lambasting Plexus for dedicating precious publication space to the issue of sadomasochism and thus “not to cover other issues of importance to women.” The writers accused Plexus of American-centric, racist choices before critiquing the information and commentary of the articles themselves and challenged the publication to make “major changes in ... priorities and process in choosing what to print.” They called for a community meeting and/or the publishers to look to off our backs and Big Mamma Rag as models. This was followed by a variety of

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<sup>37</sup> “Feminist Perspectives on Sadomasochism,” LHA.

articles, a few dealing with the issue of publication priorities and process but most either defending or, the majority, condemning lesbian SM.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, on the East Coast, off our backs was publishing a similar debate about lesbian SM that emerged out of a report on a conference workshop on “lesbians and pornography.” In this case, Pat Califia wrote a scathing critique of both the workshop and the reporting of it, and offered an eloquent, if loquacious, defense of lesbian SM. In response, three off our backs authors wrote impassioned condemnations of lesbian SM in general and Califia’s work in particular.<sup>39</sup> It is hard to imagine that by the end of 1980, there was any feminist in the United States who had not heard of the lesbian SM debate. That debate, while growing stale in content, continued to grow in volume.

Feminists with specifically anti-lesbian-SM views organized in ways other than print publications. At the 1980 National Organization of Women (NOW) annual convention, anti-SMers achieved a substantial victory. NOW “reaffirmed its commitment to lesbian issues,” but the organization also passed a resolution condemning sado-masochism. Introduced by the chair of the Lesbian Rights Committee, the resolution stated that sado-masochism had, along with other controversial issues like pederasty and public sex, been “mistakenly correlated with Lesbian/Gay rights” and that it was “an issue of violence, not affectional/sexual preference/orientation.” Therefore, NOW did “not support the inclusion of ... sadomasochism ... as [a] Lesbian rights [issue], since to do so would violate the feminist principles” of NOW. Denying lesbian sado-masochists their identity as a sexual minority, NOW also declared sado-masochism an anti-feminist

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<sup>38</sup> *Plexus*, August - November 1980.

<sup>39</sup> *Off our backs*, July-November 1980.

activity and thereby marked lesbian sado-masochists as outside of feminist politics. Yet, the debate raged on.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed two letters printed in the following edition of HERESIES protested the NOW resolutions and outlined some of the objections to them. The first letter, signed by a diverse group of people, not all (or even most) of whom were lesbian sado-masochists, declared that it was “self-defeating for NOW to attack pederasty, pornography, and sadomasochism when there is considerable disagreement among feminists,” and expressed concern that “the resolution makes all feminists appear to be advocates of timid respectability who automatically repudiate everything that seems strange and different.” The second letter accused NOW of putting “gay people on notice that if they want to be acceptable they had better not go too far” and asserted that, in contrast, they believed that “all people, whatever their sexual preference and predilections, have an unalienable right to freedom of sexual association with a consenting partner, regardless of whether others approve of their behavior.” This group of ten self-identified feminist activists who were “dismayed” at the resolution explicated their beliefs further, “We therefore support the right of individuals to practice consensual sadomasochism and to use pornography for sexual gratification.” Both groups make it clear that the issue at hand is not whether one approves of another’s sexual activity or finds it feminist, but rather, that freedom of sexual expression should be central to both the gay and lesbian and feminist agendas.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “NOW supports lesbian issues, but veers right on boy-love, S&M,” *Body Politic*, (December 1980/January 1981): 23; “NEWS FLASH: Lesbian and Gay Rights” *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 93.

<sup>41</sup> “People Organize to Protest Recent NOW Resolution on Lesbian and Gay Rights,” *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 93.

The protests over the NOW resolution were included as part of an entire magazine issue devoted to sexuality. The HERESIES Collective published their twelfth issue, the “Sex Issue,” in the spring of 1981. The Collective, which was comprised of eleven women, seventeen Associate Members and four staff (two of whom were Collective members) created an “idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective.”<sup>42</sup> In the editorial for the “Sex Issue,” the Collective explained that it had taken them “almost two years to produce [this particular issue] and along the way there [had] been many disagreements and difficulties, both intellectual and interpersonal.” Describing a myriad of challenges, including an inability to agree on a common definition of “sexuality,” and reflecting earlier second wave discussions, the Collective recounted that they grappled with the social context and material realities of sexuality including “negative” aspects and reproductive issues. In the end, they decided to offer as many voices as they could, but also agreed that since they could not agree, they included a number of editorials throughout the publication, the product of individual or pairs of collective members who desired to express a point of view. They concluded by saying that they hoped that “this issue will stimulate you in all senses of the word, and arouse your desire to inquire into the meaning of sexuality for yourself and for feminism.”<sup>43</sup> As evidenced by the 90-plus page journal which included over sixty submissions of poetry, prose and artwork from as many feminists, the meaning of sexuality remained highly controversial. Topics in the issue varied from parental influence on emerging sexuality to post-partum issues, “Butch-Fem Relationships” to strippers, and “Sexual Imperialism” to celibacy. And, of course, there were the by now

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<sup>42</sup> “Publication Information Page,” *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 97.

<sup>43</sup> “Editorial” *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 1.

requisite articles on lesbian SM and pornography.<sup>44</sup> By the time the issue was published, Califia had authored numerous explanations and defenses of lesbian SM and she wrote the issue's essay on lesbian SM, entitled "Feminism and Sadomasochism."

In the article, Califia explained that three years prior, she "cautiously began to experiment with real sadomasochism," exploring fantasies she had had since childhood and had tried to address through "[a]bstinence, consciousness-raising, and therapy." She reported that these forays into SM did not result in her losing her soul, but rather she "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." In the next five pages, Califia described not only the nature of her fantasies and her resultant sexual activities, but also included an impassioned analysis of the rhetoric and actions of anti-SM feminists, contrasting their ideas with her experience. Throughout the article Califia focused largely on de-mystifying SM, as she emphasized the centrality of consent and fantasy to SM as she understood it. Taking each in turn, Califia outlined the major objections to SM and then offered a reasoned explanation of how each particular objection was based on false assumptions.<sup>45</sup>

First, Califia addressed some feminists' assertions that SM could not be truly consensual because "society has conditioned all of us to accept inequities in power and hierarchical relationships." In response, Califia argued that sadomasochism was different: "the system is unjust because it assigns privilege based on race, gender and social class," but in SM these roles are chosen and mutable. She explained further, "If you don't like being a top of a bottom, you switch your keys. Try doing that with your

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<sup>44</sup> "Sex Issue" *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): table of contents.

<sup>45</sup> Pat Califia, "Feminism and Sadomasochism" *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 30.

biological sex or your race or your socioeconomic class.” Califia continued, “the roles are acquired and used in very different ways.” Califia also addressed feminist concerns about the symbolic roles that some people employ in SM scenes by explaining that re-enacting a power differential is very different than actually believing in and manifesting it. Califia then attended to feminist concerns about the use of pain in SM. A major part of her argument was that often times what is perceived as painful may not actually be so, since sexual excitement changes the experience of pain. But she also noted that the objection may involve less of a physical concern than a desire to preserve the “mysticism of romantic sex.”<sup>46</sup>

Califia then described growing feminist concern over fetishism, equating it with objectification and explained that, in her mind, there were qualitative differences between the use of fetish costumes that break taboos for the purpose of personal sexual satisfaction and the use of women’s bodies for the sexual gratification of men and/or to make money. In the final response to feminist critics, Califia tackled the accusation that SM was “a hostile or angry kind of sex, as opposed to the gentle and loving kind of sex that feminists should strive for.” She critiqued the women’s movement for becoming “increasingly pro-romantic love” and questioned the value of “seeking membership in a perfect, egalitarian couple.” Califia also asserted that not only was there a lot of diversity in the SM subculture but that there “are many different ways to express affection or sexual interest,” and likened SM practices to sending flowers or candy.<sup>47</sup>

It is at this point that Califia’s article turns from fairly well-reasoned argument with a generally detached tone to a deeply personal one marked by defensiveness and

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<sup>46</sup> Califia, in *Heresies*, 32-33.

<sup>47</sup> Califia in *Heresies*, 33.

even bitterness. Without warning, Califia turned the article away from an explanation of her particular reality into an attack on feminist beliefs and practices. Califia first suggested that feminist objections to SM were one in a long-line of “controversial sexual issue[s] that the women’s movement has ... reacted to with a conservative, feminine horror,” and listed a variety of problematic stances on the part of the movement. Echoing her earlier critique of the anti-porn campaign, Califia launched a four-paragraph attack, and concluded the piece with the following statement (*italics original*):

*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.*

Writing directly to anti-SM feminists, Califia confronted those whom she believed were persecuting her through a language and tone that betray a position of victimhood, even as she made claims to finding power through her sexuality. The juxtaposition is almost palpable, and the sentiment is decidedly sad. This last outburst in an otherwise logical, relatively non-emotional explanation of SM practices hints at the growing level of personal pain on the part of pro-SM women as they endured what they perceived attacks against their very selves.<sup>48</sup>

Califia’s article stands in stark contrast to the other article in *Heresies* that dealt directly with the hot sexual-political issues of the day, Paula Webster’s “Pornography and Pleasure.” Given Webster’s title and the context of the debate, one might expect the article to bemoan the horrors of pornography and the negative impact they have on women’s sexuality and pleasure. Instead, Webster offered an articulate and well-balanced analysis of the anti-pornography movement. Beginning her argument by

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<sup>48</sup> Califia in *Heresies*, 34.

underscoring the ubiquity of the campaign, she explained that “Every feminist in the New York metropolitan area has heard of Women Against Pornography,” and that it is “one of the best-organized and best-funded campaigns in movement history.” She noted that it brought together “Women from every part of the movement, and women who would have no part of the movement.” Demonstrating the powerful uniting force of the issue, Webster declared, “Political differences, both in theory and in practice, were set aside as pornography was assigned a privileged position in the discourse on women’s oppression ... A vast sea of feminist solidarity swelled around the issue.” Having squarely established the centrality of pornography to the current women’s movement, Webster turned her attention to the problematic side of this unification, “To move against the wave felt truly threatening ...[and]... no dissenting movement developed. Criticism was kept to a minimum.” “Yet,” Webster continued, “many women, under their breath, confided that something was missing from all this ... Dogmatism, moralizing, and censorial mystifying tended to dominate the anti-porn campaign.” With this observation, she moved to the center of her critique of this powerful campaign, “What about encouraging *our* sexual imagination?”<sup>49</sup>

Webster’s article returned to these central themes time and again. She explained her experience with Women Against Pornography’s slide show and subsequent tour of Times Square. Webster identified several problematic areas, including but not limited to assumptions of a singular “right” interpretation of images, questionable assumptions regarding sexual desires based on sex/gender assignment and an inability to articulate the difference between porn (which was unacceptable) and “erotica” which was acceptable and desirable. Based on her experiences and a critical analysis of them, Webster

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<sup>49</sup> Paula Webster, “Pornography and Pleasure” *Heresies*, (Spring, 1981): 48.



explained, “I am convinced that the current anti-porn campaign holds significant dangers for feminists interested in developing an analysis of violence against women and extending an analysis of female sexuality.” She described these dangers further, “The provocative claims of the campaign create an enormous obstacle in the form of moral righteousness ...” Additionally, Webster pointed out, “the campaign has chosen to organize and theorize around victimization ... not our subjectivity ...” These two tendencies, she argued, combined to create a serious problem, “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.”<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, Webster did not mention the debate regarding lesbian sadomasochism in her article. She did, however, suggest that women might use pornography to discover and explore sexual practices they might enjoy—including but not limited to SM. Whether or not Webster was advocating these activities is unclear, although it does seem clear that she was not categorically opposed to women’s participation in them. Still, Webster does not make SM the center of her argument in any way, but rather focused on the need for women “to speak of our own desires and to organize for our own and our collective sexual pleasure.” At the same time, Webster challenged her readers to question assumptions about the nature of women and female sexuality as inherently different (innately loving, peaceful and therefore better) than men and male sexuality. She concluded by encouraging readers to “switch our focus from men’s pleasure to our

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<sup>50</sup> Webster in *Heresies*, 48-50.

own,” and imagined the creation of “a truly radical pornography that spoke to female desire as we are beginning to know it and we would like to see it acted out.”<sup>51</sup>

Taken together, Califia and Webster’s articles in *Heresies* foreshadow the bifurcated reactions many feminists would have to the anti-porn movement in the aftermath of the Barnard conference and, later, during the Dworkin-MacKinnon legislative campaigns against pornography. On one hand, there were staunch defenders of SM as a feminist practice and sexual identity, and on the other hand, there were feminists who were perhaps unsure about SM’s place in the feminist movement but were turned off by the anti-porn movement’s increasingly dogmatic and seemingly uni-lateral perspectives on what most feminists saw as a set of extremely complicated issues. At the same time, there were still anti-porn turned anti-SM activists who staunchly defended their practices and analysis as the singular legitimate feminist stance on the topic. Even with these positions clearly staked out, the debate over lesbian SM was far from over.

In April 1981, *Big Mamma Rag*, another major feminist publication, published two full pages critiquing lesbian SM, one ostensibly a review of Califia’s recent book on lesbian sexuality *Sapphisty*, which was actually a denunciation of lesbian SM, and one an outright attack on it entitled “Lesbian Feminism & Sadomasochism: Two Big Contradiction In Terms.” In it, Women Against Sexist Violence in Pornography and Media echoed Ti-Grace Atkinson’s 1975 comments, that “s&m is the most counterrevolutionary proposition that has hit the women’s movement brandishing the name of feminism.” The attack reiterated earlier arguments that “the lesbian feminist concept of s&m is a renaming of male concepts of domination.” At the same time, the

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<sup>51</sup> Webster in *Heresies*, 51.

group's statement explicitly articulated what other critiques had implied, that the "message lesbian feminists involved in s&m give to our male dominated culture [is that] women want what women have always had, domination and degradation." The piece responded, at least in part, to Califia's 1980 critique accusing anti-pornographers of Puritanism and continued the scathing critique of lesbian SM.<sup>52</sup>

As was the norm by this point in the debate, the article was quickly followed by a variety of letters to the editors; some defended SM while others applauded the critique. One letter in particular stands out. Written by Sue Goding, a woman who identified herself as having been "in a lesbian S&M relationship," she argued that having fantasies and enacting them were two different things. Indeed because of her previous experience, she believed that "Sadomasochism is not a feminist lifestyle," as it "endangers our ability to love and to work together in an anti-hierarchal process." While she based this assessment on her limited experience with one couple that seemed to have difficulty negotiating the boundaries of power-play, nevertheless Goding added a new perspective to the debate, even though her analysis did not stray far from previous incarnations of that dispute.<sup>53</sup>

Shortly after Heresies and amidst the debate in Big Mamma Rag, in September 1981, Lesbian Connection published a variety of responses to Anonymous from Colchester's call for information on SM (originally published in the November 1979 issue of LC). Of the total of published responses, six were explicitly pro SM while four were explicitly anti-SM. The distribution was not representative of lesbian or even reader opinion at large since two responses were written by Samois members Pat Califia and

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<sup>52</sup> Women Against Sexist Violence in Pornography and Media, "Lesbian Feminism & Sadomasochism: Two Big Contradictions In Terms," Big Mamma Rag, Vol. 9, No. 2 (March 1981), 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> "letters home to mama," Big Mama Rag, April, 1981, 1,2,20.

Janet Schrim and another pro SM was anonymously sent from San Francisco. The heavy influence of writers from Samois and the Bay Area is likely due to the fact that Samois published Anonymous' call for information in their December 1979 newsletter and specifically prompted pro-SM women to respond.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the responses overall reflected the major arguments for and against SM as a lesbian-feminist activity discussed earlier. At the same time, the tone of the arguments on both sides was deeply emotional, personal and at times aggressive or defensive. This tone seems to have begun with Janet Schrim's article in What Colour and was echoed in Califia's piece in Heresies. Together, they represent a significant shift from the majority of discussions of lesbian SM throughout the 1970s.<sup>55</sup>

The debate over lesbian SM continued in the pages of these publications, with varying intensity and frequency. At the same time, throughout the entirety of 1981, Samois was engaged in dialogues with many of these publications regarding its desire to print ads for What Color is Your Handkerchief and the forthcoming book, *Coming to Power*. Off our backs, Big Mama Rag, and Inciter (and perhaps other publications as well) asked Samois for more information regarding then publications and most eventually decided that they would not run the ads. They explained that due to the collective nature of decision making and their inability to come to consensus on whether or not lesbian SM was an acceptable feminist practice, they were unable to act on the request for advertising space.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Samois, "Newsletter," December 1979, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> "Responses," *Lesbian Connection*, Vol V, Issue 3 (September 1981): 13-16. There were also two responses to these responses in the following Issues of *Lesbian Connection*, one from each "side" of the debate. The content varies little from previous discussions but it is significant the debate continued for months.

<sup>56</sup> Letters to Samois from *off our backs*, *Big Mama Rag* and *Inciter* in "Samois" vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archive.

Amidst and indeed in response to all this controversy, in October 1981, a group of New York SM women organized. Lesbians into SM, later Lesbian Sex Mafia, or LSM was formed by Jo Arnone and Dorothy Allison as a women-only support group for “anyone actively involved in any aspect of ‘politically incorrect sex’ as well as those who have dreams but no actual experience to their credit.” In their first month of existence, LSM held an educational workshop entitled “Esoteric Expertise and Safety” and hosted a “discussion by Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin” entitled “Sex Politics and Feminism.” Women SM activists developed networking connections and skills similar to those in the anti-pornography movement with West Coast activists like Califia and Rubin helping support the creation of the East Coast organization.<sup>57</sup>

LSM was similar to Samois in several ways. According to the group’s twentieth anniversary publication, “the three tenets of the organization [were] confidentiality, consuality [sic] and safety.”<sup>58</sup> Emphasizing the centrality of these values to their existence, members of the nascent organization were supplied with business cards that informed the recipient, “You have just met a member of the Lesbian Sex Mafia,” and explained that the group was “A support group for women exploring consensual [sic], uninhibited, sexual expression.”<sup>59</sup> Announcements about fall 1981 programs promised trips to various sex clubs, “A Sleazy party,” and workshops focusing on monogamy, guilt and the boundaries of unhealthy SM.<sup>60</sup> With LSM’s inception, the nascent women’s SM movement had become bi-coastal, much like its counterpart WAVPM/WAP.

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<sup>57</sup> LSM, “Lesbian S/M,” flyer, Fall 1981, in “Lesbian S/M Support Group” vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>58</sup> LSM, “LSM/Leather History Time Line,” in LSM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary booklet, 2001; author’s personal collection. While one cannot be entirely sure, it seems LSM’s use of this three-word catch phrase is a precursor to the ubiquitous use of the “safe, sane, consensual” mantra of the current Leather community.

<sup>59</sup> LSM, “Business Card from 1981,” in 1981 file of LSM organizational archives.

<sup>60</sup> LSM flyer from Fall 1981, LHA.

As the women's SM community expanded the feminist discussion regarding lesbian sado-masochism continued to intensify. In October 1981, Alice Walker published "A Letter of The Times" in *Ms.* magazine. Written as a letter from a fictional university professor, Susan Marie, to her friend Lucy, Walker critiqued the racialized politics of the lesbian SM movement. "Susan Marie" had been teaching her students about slavery by having them assume the historical roles of the enslaved and the enslavers—so they would grapple with some of the deeper issues around consent. "Does anyone want to be a slave? we pondered. As a class, we thought not."<sup>61</sup> And yet, the class was surprised and dismayed to witness "a television special on sadomasochism that aired the night before our class ended" which portrayed an interracial Master/slave relationship with the white woman as dominant and the black as her slave. Susan Marie's assessment of the situation was grim,

All I had been teaching was subverted by that one image and I was incensed to think of the hard struggle of my students to rid themselves of stereotype, to combat prejudice, to put themselves into enslaved women's skins, and then to see their struggle mocked, and the actual enslaved *condition* of literally millions of our mothers trivialized—because two ignorant women insisted on their right to publicly act out a 'fantasy' that still strikes terror in black women's hearts. And embarrassment and disgust, at least in the hearts of most of the white women in my class.

Walker made it clear that for her the weight of history as it pertained to race outweighed individual desire for sexual fantasy because of its capacity to reinforce both historical and existing power differentials.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, as Susan Marie was quick to point out, not all students agreed with her. "One white woman student, apparently with close ties to our local lesbian S&M group, said she could see nothing wrong with what we'd seen on TV." This SM supporter

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<sup>61</sup> Alice Walker, "A Letter of The Times," *Ms.*, October 1981, 63-4.

<sup>62</sup> Walker, in *Ms.*, 63-4.

defended the couple, saying, “It is all fantasy ... No harm done. Slavery, real slavery, is over after all.” Susan Marie retorted, “But it isn’t over ... and Kathleen Barry’s book on female sexual slavery and Linda Lovelace’s book on *being* such a slave, are not the only recent indications that this is true.” In her closing paragraphs, Walker’s fictional professor summed up why the portrayal of this interracial couple was so problematic: “Many black women fear it is as slaves white women want them; no doubt many white women think some amount of servitude from black women is their due.” She continued, “regardless of the ‘slave’ on television, black women do not want to be slaves. They never wanted to be slaves. We will be ourselves and free, or die in the attempt.” Walker/“Susan Marie” are convinced that the use of dominance/submission between white and black women was “an attempt ... to lead us into captivity,” one that she was determined to resist.<sup>63</sup> Walker thus challenged lesbian sado-masochists not because they recreated straightforward patriarchal abuses of power by men, but because of the historically-based power differentials *between* groups of women. This analysis provided not only a critique of US American racial politics but also helped demonstrate the complexity of power itself. As many women of color activists had done throughout the second wave, Walker demanded that feminists grapple with unequal power relationships within the movement, adding an important and significant subtlety to the debate.

Much of this now rather stagnant debate was summarized in “A Report on the Sex Crisis” in the March 1982 issue of *Ms.* In it, three contributors laid out the complex issues surrounding feminist analyses of sex, moving through the sexual agenda starting with the birth control pill and sexual liberation and through feminist theorists and theories such as Anne Koedt, Shulamith Firestone, lesbian separatism, Kate Millet, Susan

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<sup>63</sup> Walker, in *Ms.*, 63-4.

Brownmiller, Erica Jong and the anti-porn movement. The authors then asserted that “by the late seventies a new consensus had settled into the minds of most women who considered themselves feminists” that “*feminist* sexuality would be devoid of even a semblance of power transactions.” It was shortly thereafter, they reported, that the “first cracks in the feminist consensus appeared when women split over pornography.” The authors explained that some feminists challenged the anti-porn movement’s assumptions, particularly that pornography caused violence or that it was “the linchpin of male domination.” Indeed, they acknowledged, “some women began to admit that they even enjoyed pornography.” Then, the authors contended, it was the issue of lesbian sadomasochism that irrevocably broke the feminist sexual consensus. While “most feminists still find pornography horrifying and sadomasochism, well, perverse,” the authors explained, “a sizable minority are glad to see some of the old shibboleths crumbling and new questions, new explorations opening up.” In the final three paragraphs the authors try to prepare readers for the coming “painful debates,” yet reminded feminists that while “we do seem confused ... we need to remind ourselves in times like these that we are the first movement in history ... to address itself to sensual desire, to fantasy, to personal eroticism as *political issues*.” So, they concluded, if “we find ourselves now where angels fear to tread, it is because we have had the courage to make the ‘personal’ political. Nobody said it would be easy.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, events quickly followed that proved the authors’ forecast truer than anyone could have predicted.

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<sup>64</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, E. Hess and G. Jacobs, “A Report on the Sex Crisis,” *Ms.*, March 1982, 61-68.



## Chapter Four

### Irreconcilable Differences

#### Lesbian SM and the '82 Barnard Conference Split the Women's Movement

In most USAmerican feminist circles, “Barnard” remains synonymous with “the Sex Wars” and the divisive split among second wave feminists around issues of pornography, feminist sexuality and censorship. Less frequently do theorists, feminist or otherwise, acknowledge that there was a long history that led up to Barnard—though they do acknowledge the profound effect of the 1982 conference on feminist history. In sexuality studies, Barnard is “like our Stonewall,” the birthplace of sexuality studies (as Stonewall is regularly invoked as the start of the gay liberation movement). In the case of Barnard, little has been written that questions that assumption; and, as with Stonewall, despite all our knowledge to the contrary, the Barnard conference may hold its birthplace status in the public imaginary for quite some time to come. Of course, this assumption does have an historical basis. Barnard was the conference out of which Gayle Rubin’s now famous “Thinking Sex” article was first published. Indeed, she publicly presented a version of the paper for the first time at the conference. Yet, as we now know, the conference itself, the controversy that surrounded it, and Rubin’s talk had histories of their own.

Given these histories and the crystallization of pro and anti-SM camps in the early 1980s, the clash that ensued at Barnard was all but inevitable. Nonetheless, at the time, it was both surprising and deeply upsetting to many of those directly involved. Indeed, as a result of the decade of feminist discussion about SM preceded that Barnard, the

conference might best be seen as the major eruption, rather than the emergence of the Sex Wars. As such, Barnard served to complete a fissure that was already deep. This eruption had a profound impact on the feminist community, engendering intense reactions from a wide range of participants and protesters.<sup>1</sup> In writing this chapter, I've resisted my own and others' attempts to re-create what "really" happened that day and, instead, have chosen to focus on the dominant perceptions of the conference, both before and after, and how those perceptions led not only to the eruption itself but its lasting effects as well.

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On a sunny and warm Saturday at the end of April 1982, The Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadoomasochism, twelve women strong donning shirts imprinted with the group name, gathered to picket a conference and pass out flyers explaining the reason for their protest.<sup>2</sup> Given the success of feminist activism to date, this scene was not unusual; the fact that the group was protesting a conference of other feminists was, however, unusual. The group stood outside the gathering of The Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College in New York City and distributed a double-sided flyer which challenged "this conference's promotion of one perspective on sexuality and its silencing of the views of a major portion of the feminist movement." It also noted the inclusion of organizations that "support and produce pornography, that promote sex roles and sadoomasochism," which, protestors claimed, wished to deny

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<sup>1</sup> Barnard also saw the addition of the issue of free speech and academic freedom to the complicated discussion that already existed around lesbian SM and pornography, though this will be discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>2</sup> "Regional Forecast," *The New York Times*. New York, N.Y.: Apr 24, 1982. pg. 18; Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: A Memoir of a Revolution*, (The Dial Press, 1999), 315; tacie dejanikus "charges of exclusion & mccarthyism at barnard conference," *off our backs*, June 1982, 5.

children protection from sexual abuse. Inflammatory descriptions of these groups included No More Nice Girls who “contend that pornography is liberating” and Samois, represented by “one of its founders, Gayle Rubin,” which reportedly “condemns feminists as ‘prudes’” and “endorsed the stand of NAMBLA (Nat’l Man-Boy Love Association) against laws that prohibit adults from sexually abusing children.” The second side of the flyer explained that The Lesbian Sex Mafia was “Samois’ New York City counterpart, recently founded by [conference] workshop leader, Dorothy Allison,” and was known for its “underground demonstrations of bondage, flagellation and ‘fist-fucking.’” The fourth so-called “group” was “several individual women who champion butch-femme sex roles,” indicating that most of these women “have given public support to Samois.” The Coalition charged these groups with “advocating the same kind of patriarchal sexuality that flourishes in our culture’s mainstream” and accused lesbian sadomasochists of “sexual fascism.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the Coalition clearly stated that they were “not criticizing any women for having internalized sex roles, for having sadomasochistic fantasies, or for becoming sexually aroused by pornography,” and they understood that “all people who have been socialized in a patriarchal society ... have internalized sexual patterns of dominance and submission.” Nevertheless, according to their flyer, The Coalition took issue with these groups because they were “actively promoting these [patriarchal] values through their public advocacy of pornography, sex roles and sadomasochism” and criticized the aforementioned groups’ “insistence that this kind of sexuality means liberation for women.” The flyer concluded, asserting that “feminists must continue to analyze

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<sup>3</sup> Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism, “We Protest,” flyer, 1982 Scholar and the Feminist Conference, Barnard College Archives, 1. In addition to being inflammatory, many of these descriptions were factually inaccurate, according to several sources after the fact.

oppressive sexual institutions and values as we put forth a sexual politics founded on equality, creativity, and respect for female bodies and eroticism.” Finally, The Coalition expressed dismay and sadness that “the organizers of this conference have shut out a major part of the feminist movement and have thrown their support to the very sexual institutions and values that oppress all women.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the increased frequency and intensity of debate about SM in feminist circles, the critique of the Coalition was not a new one. However, their strategy of picketing a conference of feminists and their claim of exclusion marked an important shift. And while the protest itself may have been unexpected to attendees and some presenters, the conference organizers were well aware that there would be such a response even before the event began. According to sources after the fact, members of the Coalition either called or encouraged others to call the office of the President of the college and the Women’s Center to report that “the planning committee at Barnard had been taken over by sado-masochists” or that the committee had been duped by the same. Other callers apparently asked, “were we aware that four of the people invited to participate in this conference were involved in various kinds of sexual practices that were reprehensible?”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Jane Gould, Director of the Barnard Women’s Center and a member of the organizing committee, recounted that she was informed by Barnard President’s secretary that the

office had been inundated with calls from Women Against Pornography attacking the conference, calling it pornography, and announcing their intention to picket ... [one caller reported that] the conference planning had been dominated by a Californian lesbian group called Samois.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism, “We Protest,” 2.

<sup>5</sup> Barnard Aftermath transcripts, LHA, pg 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Gould, *Juggling*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1997), 200.

As a result of these calls, the Executive Committee of Barnard College looked into and discussed the Diary, the conference's innovative program, and two days before the conference, the Barnard administration confiscated it.<sup>7</sup>

Gould was informed of this decision during a meeting in which President Ellen Futter insisted, due to the Diary's content and presentation, "that it must be destroyed, shredded immediately." The administration later reported that the confiscation was done in the name of "misrepresentation." In a special edition of the Barnard Bulletin, published shortly after the conference, Futter explained that the "booklet made it seem as if the college had taken a position, whereas the conference in contrast was clearly an airing of ideas and a discussion of issues." She clarified that it was not the text of the Diary but rather it was the "composite sense in the publication," which Gould explained, included "the graphics and the juxtaposition of the graphics and the copy," which The Bulletin reported, "one alumna called ... 'lewd.'" In light of the administration's actions, Gould called emergency meetings of the Women's Center executive committee and the conference planning committee, and through the combined efforts of both

were able to work out an arrangement whereby the administration agreed to republish the *Diary*—without substantive changes—deleting all references to Barnard College, the Women's Center, and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation ... and the college agreed to assume all printing and mailing costs and to take the responsibility for sending it to all conference participants [after the conference ended].<sup>8</sup>

The Coalition had succeeded in convincing the Barnard administration to disassociate itself from the Conference as well as interrupting the proceedings since participants would no longer be able to access the Diary as part of the Conference experience, as the Organizing Committee had intended.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Gould, 200-201; Mary Witherall, "Futter Cites Inaccurate Portrayal for Confiscation," *Barnard Bulletin*, May 12, 1982, 1.

The controversial Diary, which included, among other things, notes from the organizing committee meetings, overviews of the workshops, and individual committee members' thoughts on a variety of topics, offers unique insight into the planning and organization of the Conference. The central organizing questions were outlined by the Academic Coordinator of the Conference, Carole Vance, and comprised half of a letter which served first as an invitation to the committee and then as the opening page of the Diary:

- How do women get sexual pleasure in patriarchy?
- Given the paradox that the sexual domain is a dangerous one for women, either as an arena of restriction and repression or as an arena of experimentation and resistance, how do women of various ethnic, racial and class groups strategize for pleasure?
- What are the points of similarity and difference between feminist analyses of pornography, incest, and male and female sexual "nature" and those of the right wing?
- Dare we persist in questioning traditional sexuality and sexual arrangements in the current political climate? If not, when is a "good" time for feminists to do so?
- What is the political significance of the position outlined by Betty Friedan, which would jettison gay and lesbian rights and sexual nonconformity as issues marginal to feminist goals?
- What is the nature of the current conflict between the "social purity" and "libertarian" factions of the feminist community? What can be learned from similar debates during the first wave of feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

Also in the letter, Vance contended, "sex is a social construction which articulates at many points with the economic, social, and political structures of the material world. Sex is not a 'natural fact.'" She suggested that "through discussion" the conference would "identify the most pressing concerns for feminism," and would build on contemporary discussions and debates in the feminist press (including the Heresies Sex Issue) that raised "questions about the place of sexuality in our theory and in our lives."<sup>9</sup> The planning committee's statement, dated January 1982, spoke more specifically of the double bind of women's sexuality, asserting that

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<sup>9</sup> Carole S. Vance, "Untitled Letter," in *Diary of a Conference on SEXUALITY*, Scholar and the Feminist, 1982; Diary, Barnard Center for Research on Women Archive, Barnard College, NYC NY, p. 1.

to speak only of pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to talk only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.

From these first paragraphs, it is clear that the organizers of the conference both understood the complexity of women's relationship to sexuality and, perhaps more significantly, sought to ensure that that complexity not become lost in rhetoric or collapsed into one side of a bifurcated analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, the planning committee noted the prevalence of these divisions within the women's movement, explaining that

The debate has moved from women's right to have sexual pleasure detached from reproduction to sexual violence and victimization. Most recent issues include: the meaning and effect of pornography; sexual safety versus sexual adventure; the significance of sexual styles, for example, butch/femme; male and female sexual nature; and politically correct and incorrect sexual positions.

Interestingly, they do not specifically cite lesbian sado-masochism as a central concern. While it is possible that the growing conflict regarding the issue is being alluded to in references to "pornography" and "safety," it is significant that the topic was not addressed directly. Still, given the reference to debates regarding butch/femme and pornography, it seems likely that the authors were willing to engage "hot-button" issues. This exclusion suggests that the conference organizers regarded lesbian sado-masochism as part of a broader theoretical challenge for feminism, rather than a stand-alone issue.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, the committee summarized the goals of the conference:

We see the conference not as providing definitive answers, but as setting up a more useful framework within which feminist thought may proceed, an opportunity for the

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<sup>10</sup> Carole S. Vance, "Conference Statement" in *Diary of a Conference on SEXUALITY*, Scholar and the Feminist, 1982; Diary, Barnard Center for Research on Women Archive, Barnard College, NYC NY, p. 38. It seems likely that this statement was crafted by the entire planning committee, although it was only signed by Vance.

<sup>11</sup> Vance, "Conference Statement," 38.

participants to question some of their understandings and consider anew the complexity of the sexual situation. Our goal is to allow more information about the diversity of women's experiences to emerge.

While clearly a challenge to the assumed patriarchal status quo of female sexuality, it is unlikely that many feminists at the time would take issue with these goals, at least not worded this way.<sup>12</sup>

The registration flyer mailed to potential participants by the Barnard Women's Center seemed equally well-balanced and uncontroversial, at least in terms of feminist theory and ideology as then understood. A small description of the conference explained:

Recognizing that sexuality has been a topic of debate within the feminist community, the conference will address women's sexual autonomy, choice and pleasure, acknowledging that sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as exploration, pleasure and agency. Giving consideration to the political, social, historical and psychological dimensions, we will look at 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist attitudes, women's rights to sexual pleasure apart from reproduction and the implications of the New Right attacks on feminism.

The advertised program included a two hour and fifteen minute morning session, complete with welcoming remarks from the President of Barnard College, a panel discussion, moderated by Carole Vance, and talks on historical understandings of feminist sexual thought by Ellen Carol DuBois, Linda Gordon, Hortense Spillers and Alice Echols. The hour and forty-five minute afternoon workshops included topics such as "The Defense of Sexual Restriction by Anti-Abortion Activists," "Sexuality and Creativity—A Theatre Workshop," and "Sexual Purity: Maintaining Class and Race Boundaries." Other topics included language and literature, pornography, disability, sexual politics and the sexuality of children and teens. The afternoon workshop was followed by a Closing Session entitled "Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion

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<sup>12</sup> Vance, "Conference Statement," 39-40.



and Pleasure,” by Amber Hollibaugh, poetry readings by Hattie Gossett, Cherrie Moraga and Sharon Olds, and then a ninety minute reception.<sup>13</sup>

The day’s program reflected a diverse agenda that ranged topically from abortion to adolescent sexuality, from language and theatre to class, race and disability. There were also a series of workshops that specifically engaged eroticism in a variety of forms, but no one topic or set of related topics dominated the agenda. This diversity of issues reflects not only the interests of Vance as Academic Coordinator but also the priorities discussed and developed by the planning committee, as evidenced in the Conference Diary. It included almost thirty pages of minutes from the planning committee and “represent actual discussions,” “written immediately after each meeting for rapid distribution” and “unselfconsciously written for the planning committee alone.”<sup>14</sup> This makes it unlikely the minutes were edited to hide some alternative or subversive agenda, as alleged by the Coalition in their protest of the Conference.

While groups like WAVAW and WAP are referenced in the notes, in the last meeting, dated Tuesday, November 24<sup>th</sup>, the group “reiterated our intention to avoid setting off controversy in the ruts available to feminists now, i.e. either through papers entitled ‘Why WAP is Wrong and S/M is Wonderful’ or ‘Why WAP is Wonderful and S/M is Wrong’.” “It is not cowardice that motivates our choice,” the group argued, “setting everyone off and side-taking is an obstacle to thinking about sexuality

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<sup>13</sup> Women’s Center, “The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality,” registration flyer, 1982 Scholar and the Feminist Conference, Barnard College Archives, pp. 1-4. For a twenty dollar fee (or ten dollars for students or limited income) attendees would receive lunch and the conference booklet and be able to attend one of the afternoon workshops, for which they were to indicate their preferences on the form. I need to figure out how to put the accent on Moraga’s last name.

<sup>14</sup> *Diary*, 3.

differently. However, we intend to explore the political ramifications of all feminist positions.”<sup>15</sup>

One could argue that this statement was intended to give the *appearance* of inclusivity, yet, substantial evidence exists that the planning committee developed a set of theoretical questions that went far beyond the binary of good and bad in terms of *both* SM and anti-porn theories and practices. The text that outlined the group’s discussion of SM listed a wide variety of questions, including but not limited to:

What does it mean to organize your sexuality around breaking taboos?  
 What has occurred in the lesbian community to create an environment for S/M?  
 Is one of its main attractions about crossing boundaries of power, and perhaps symbolically, of gender?  
 Do we assume only men feel sexual aggression?<sup>16</sup>

These questions are followed by a brief description and discussion of the new Samois hanky code cards, accompanied by a photocopy of the same. Demonstrating critical thinking about the ongoing debate, the committee theorized that, “[d]espite their many points of disagreement, S/M and Women Against Pornography (WAP) are concerned with structure: S/M, in providing stylized and highly structured sexual interactions; WAP, in prescribing a politically acceptable framework for sex.” The group then posited that “S/M may gain ground in the lesbian feminist community” for a variety of reasons, including “a vacuum about sexuality ... in feminist’ theory and our lives” or because the “bravado and excitement of coming out on S/M replaces the no longer attainable excitement of coming out as a lesbian in the feminist community 10 years ago,” or because it “provides clear boundaries (the top, the bottom) with appropriate behaviors for

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<sup>15</sup> *Diary*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Diary*, 12.

each.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, rather than advocating SM as the Coalition alleged, the committee instead sidestepped the issue of approval or condemnation in favor of a feminist analysis of SM’s existence and possible expansion within feminist circles.

However, the committee was deeply critical of the organized anti-pornography movement, and pointed to some of the roadblocks groups like WAP constructed to creating a feminist understanding of sex. Observing that there was a “complete conflation of sex and violence,” the group wondered how this had happened—and theorized that it had something to do with the anti-rape campaigns of the 1970s, which engaged in “lumping ... a common (il)logical technique in the Left analysis ... not unique to feminism.” Addressing Women Against Pornography specifically, the group noted that WAP “in some ways heightens women’s fears of male violence and male danger,” noting that women “who have heard WAP lectures and presentations said their techniques were shameless and demagogic; there was no room for alternative interpretation or contradiction.”<sup>18</sup> A second discussion proved even more scathing in its critique, paralleling WAP to Right-to-Life groups (the latter incredibly unpopular in the feminist movement), accusing them of “reliance on visual material to shock, no subtlety in discussion, no ambiguity, use of the slippery slope approach [and] ... the stripping of away of context.” Pushing this analogy even further, the *Diary* reports that, “Concern with defining and being the good girl [i.e. one who is not attracted to pornography] underlies WAP and the anti-abortion movement; this concern derives from and shores up the patriarchal family.”<sup>19</sup> Jane Gould, Director of the Barnard Women’s Center and

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<sup>17</sup> *Diary*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Diary*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Diary*, 19. Another critique outlined later in the *Diary* was that “interest in the anti-pornography movement has not been great in the Black community, in part because the anti-porn analysis does

committee member, recalled in her memoir that other “members expressed strong distaste for this [anti-porn] movement, and several women pointed out that the antipornography movement had dominated the issue of sexuality within the women’s movement for almost a decade.” “Up until now,” Gould continued, “feminists had hesitated to speak out against it lest they appear unsisterly, but the opinions expressed over and over at these first meetings was [sic] that the time had come for another point of view to be presented.”<sup>20</sup>

The *Diary* reflected this concern, reporting “considerable discussion about that the fact that many feminists had remained silent about their doubts or opposition to the anti-pornography movement.”<sup>21</sup> In response to these concerns, Gould confirmed, the committee “refused the offer of an antipornography group to serve on the committee and present a workshop at the conference” because they believed that “if permitted ... Women Against Pornography would destroy the spirit of open inquiry.”<sup>22</sup> It is clear that the conference organizing committee not only believed that there had been significant exposure to the anti-porn perspective, but also that that perspective was stifling feminist discussions of sexuality and reinforcing the oppression of women by feeding into dominant beliefs about female sexuality. Therefore, the organizers did in fact purposely exclude the anti-pornography movement from official participation in the conference in order to allow for a diversity of opinions and analysis to develop.

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not include the experience and motivation of young women working in pornography or on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.” The committee’s problematic conflation of race and class and the assumption that Black women in general would necessarily identify with those working in the porn industry in particular aside, I believe this critique is yet another attempt by the committee to prove how the anti-porn movement is seen as out of touch with the more socially conscious components of the feminist movement—in this case, feminists who understand and take conscious action around issues of race.

<sup>20</sup> Gould, 194.

<sup>21</sup> *Diary*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Gould, 195.

Given this explicit choice, the Coalition's charges of exclusion seemed well-grounded and their protest, in their mind, was a defensive action, one created from the Coalition's belief it was being unfairly judged. Yet, from the Coalitions' critique of particular groups and individuals highlighted involved with lesbian sadomasochists, it is clear that they believed they were being excluded not because of their own actions, but because of the inclusion of those advocating SM. While the Coalition itself may have been formed by individuals and organizations active and/or prominent in the anti-pornography movement, and the flyer included a few key references to porn, the central message was definitively anti-SM. Indeed the group's name spelled out this very opposition. This resistance was warranted if, as the flyer suggested, the conference was some sort of front for advocating contested sexual practices under the guise of theoretical and academic discussion. Yet, no historical data supports this claim. Both the Program and the Diary indicate that no such pro-SM agenda was intended; rather both documents demonstrate a complexity of analysis and the explicit desire to allow for productive conversation, though, in the minds of conference organizers, this meant limiting the impact of the anti-pornography movement on the Conference. So, on one hand, the Coalition's tactics only reinforced their critics' image of their unwillingness to engage respectfully in debate; and, on the other hand, the committee's decision to exclude anti-porn activists similarly reinforced the Coalition's impression that feminism was being co-opted by those whose opinions they could not accept given their ideas about feminism.

With the last-minute confiscation of the Diary and the Coalition protestors as back-drop, approximately 800 feminists, academics and activists alike, gathered for the

Conference.<sup>23</sup> There is little historical evidence about what actually occurred at the conference beyond the Program, although I've chosen to examine audio recordings of two workshops relevant to the SM/porn debate offer material about the tone of the presentations and the responses to them.<sup>24</sup> "Pornography and the Construction of the Female Subject" included a talk by Kaja Silverman from Simon Fraser University that focused on an analysis of the *Story of O* as the ultimate example of how female subjects are constructed of, by and only in relation to the male subject.<sup>25</sup> While Silverman took pains to ensure that she was not against all pornography, she did emphasize the capitalist nature of sado-masochism, as she used literary critique to make her academic arguments. The discussion that followed Silverman's rather high-brow academic talk illustrated the diversity of opinion in the audience, but all of the material available for analysis indicated that the conversation was respectful, if impassioned. In all, the workshop seemed to be a reasoned discussion of matters related to pornography and its effect on female subjectivity.<sup>26</sup>

Equally even-keeled was the majority of Gayle Rubin's "Concepts for a Radical Politics of Sex." Rubin focused her talk on the legal and moral proscriptions around

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<sup>23</sup> Orlando, Lisa, "Lust at Last! Or Spandex ...". Source of article unknown. The actual number of attendees is also contested. Orlando reports 800, while the registration flyer indicated that the conference would be limited to 600. *The Barnard Bulletin* (9.82) reported the confiscated diary was sent to the 800 attendees. The *off our backs* coverage quotes attendance at 750.

<sup>24</sup> There are recordings of other workshops, though precious little other historical evidence exists from the day of the conference. I chose to work specifically with these two sources, rather than all of the workshops available because, as discussed in the introduction, I am more interested in the reactions to the Conference than reconstructing the Conference itself. I used these two to show the tone of the discussion and to prove that there was not a pro-SM agenda at the conference and that for the most part, the discussions seem to have been respectful and productive, though one would never know this from the coverage of the events by both sides.

<sup>25</sup> The other portion of the workshop was a film by Bette Gordon, though the exact subject nature and discussion that followed were not available for analysis as the audio recording of the workshop ended abruptly.

<sup>26</sup> Kaja Silverman, "Pornography and the Construction of the Female Subject," The Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference, Audio recording, April 24, 1982, Barnard College Archives. Some of the end of the group discussion was cut-off, so it is difficult to know what happened after that.

sexual behavior in American culture. Throughout the talk, Rubin discussed the history and highlighted the flaws of then-current sexual laws in the United States and advocated for a restructuring of sex laws in order to emphasize consent and punish coercion. “I don’t think that any consensual sexual behavior should be illegal ... What should be the concern of the law ... is not the kind of sexual act but whether or not force is involved.” In addition to legal reform, Rubin also strongly advocated for changing moral and ethical ideas about sex, through sex education and putting sexual difference into perspective.

After all you’re not immoral, you’re not sent to jail, you’re not deserted by your family if you do or do not like chicken. Ultimately, what does it matter if someone wants to masturbate over a shoe? We do need to sex seriously as a political issue, but we also need to drain sex of some of this moral content. We need to develop a morality around sex that emphasizes responsibility towards other people no matter what kind or how brief the encounter and the deemphasizes the importance of the myriad kinds of sexual arousal.

Part and parcel of presenting these ideas, Rubin introduced her now famous diagrams of the “charmed circle” and the “sex hierarchy” in which she lays out her complicated and brilliant theories of sexual oppression. These theories would become the bedrock of the field of “sexuality studies,” which emerged in the early 1980s and began to take hold in the academy in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most incendiary part of the talk was the beginning in which Rubin lambasted “the current sexual demonology promoted in the name of feminism” which “presents sexual behavior in the worst possible light.” She thus described feminist sexual theory as a “massive exercise in scapegoating,” focusing its analysis on erotic minorities (transsexuals, sado-masochists, etc) or sexual practices (pornography, sex education) as

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<sup>27</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Concepts for a Radical Politics of Sexuality, The Scholar and the Feminist IX” Track 2, Audio recording, April 24, 1982, Barnard College Archives. That “Thinking Sex” has been reprinted in innumerable volumes, most significantly perhaps *Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader* and *Culture, society and sexuality*, and, according to Google Scholar, is cited by no less than 800 academic articles and books stands as significant evidence of the impact of Rubin’s theories.

“keystones in the edifice of female subordination” which “simply deflects attention away from the family, the state, religion, education and the media.” “In doing so, this discourse on sexuality,” Rubin argued, “has dovetailed with the wrong side of the political discourse on sex that has developed over the last century.” Rubin then compared feminist sexual theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Kathy Barry to J. Edgar Hoover and Pope John Paul II, respectively.<sup>28</sup>

Based on this evidence, Rubin asserted, feminists needed “a body of analysis that is somewhat distinct from feminism to understand sexuality.” “It is often assumed,” Rubin continued, “that feminism is the privileged site of analysis of sex and that somehow sex and gender are so connected that understanding one leads automatically to understanding the other. ... Sex and gender are connected but they are not the same thing.” Thus, we find that Rubin’s desire for a new analytical framework emerged directly out of her dissatisfaction with feminist theories of sexuality, despite the fact that the published version of Rubin’s talk re-ordered the ideas, placing her analysis of feminism at the end of the article. While Rubin later argued the article “Thinking Sex” was not an attack on feminism, it seems reasonable that the use of the word “demonology” implies serious disapproval, which perhaps added fuel to the already burning fire of the opposition.

It is important to note that while Rubin’s personal stake in the subject matter must not be overstated, at the same time it must not be ignored that she was at the time an active member of Samois and believed herself discriminated against based on her status as a lesbian sado-masochist. Thus, at least some of her critique of feminism came out of

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<sup>28</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Concepts for a Radical Politics of Sexuality, The Scholar and the Feminist IX” Track 1, Barnard College Archives.



her own personal experiences of feeling excluded from feminism. Indeed, in a conversation a few days after the conference, Rubin disclosed that she felt like “my heart is broken ... I spent my whole adult life in the women’s movement and being trashed on the pages of off our backs is a nightmare I never anticipated having to live through.”<sup>29</sup> Her critique of feminism was not only theoretical but also deeply personal—and as the effects of the Barnard conference began to emerge, she would not be only the one with a personal stake in the outcome.

Indeed, personal stakes literally took center stage the day following the conference at a speakout on “politically incorrect sex.” Held at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the event included about twenty women, diverse in age, race, ethnicity and sexual proclivity. The speakout stands as an interesting juxtaposition to the academically-based discussions at the Barnard conference. Rather than focus on theory and politics, these women largely told their own stories of coming to understand and embrace their sexualities. Several addressed the issue of coming out or being closeted regarding their “deviant” sexuality. Yet, at the same time, many of them addressed, either directly or indirectly, the fact that their desires were seen as deeply problematic by many in the feminist community. Many admitted their fear of speaking publicly about such issues, of feeling excluded from feminist movement and their subsequent need to challenge feminist orthodoxy/judgment. Yet, while some spoke about the pain they endured while at the Conference, none spoke specifically of being harassed or assaulted, intimidated or disrespected at Barnard. It seems, then, that the problem of Barnard was not one of a discrete event or set of events but, at least for these women, rather a more abstract feeling of hurt and exclusion from the women’s movement in general. Thus,

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<sup>29</sup> Audio Tape of “Barnard Discussion,” LHA.

feminists on both “sides” of the Sex Wars felt excluded, though for different reasons and with different responses.<sup>30</sup>

A few days after the conference and speakout, a group of feminists gathered at the Lesbian Herstory Archives to devise a strategic response to the Coalition’s protest. The participants included, among others, Carole Vance, Gayle Rubin, Amber Hollibaugh, Dorothy Allison and Joan Nestle. In addition to a lengthy discussion regarding the tactics of the Coalition, the group theorized why the protest occurred and drafted a letter of response. Several members also discussed what impact their role in the conference had or might have on their careers. Vance reported, “my name is mud at Women’s Studies.” Hollibaugh explained that “the woman that hired me came to the conference and was appalled,” while Allison said she was “very scared” for her career and explained “if I get fired, I want support.” Rubin explicitly declared, “I think I’ve jeopardized my academic future.” While these women feared for their jobs, there is no evidence that any of them were actually fired from existing positions for their participation in Barnard. It is harder, however, to say whether or not they were excluded from new positions or projects, as would be alleged later. Yet, the concern that they felt about their careers was only part of the experience of Barnard.<sup>31</sup>

These women’s fears of professional repercussion were accompanied by statements of personal anxiety and sadness regarding their place in the women’s movement. As previously noted, Rubin explained that she felt heartbroken. Nestle commented that she had “given her life for the Archives” and hoped that “my community can separate me and the things I’ve built from this.” Allison lamented, “I don’t feel like I

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<sup>30</sup> Audio Tape of “Politically Incorrect Speakout,” April 25, 1982, LHA.

<sup>31</sup> “Barnard Discussion,” LHA.

have a movement anymore.” Clearly, these women felt a deep sense of betrayal by the feminist movement. Thus, it seems ironic that it was, in part, these women’s response to that betrayal that led to the wider impact of the Barnard conference. The debate and discussion soon moved beyond the limits of the 800 attendees as feminists read about it in the pages of off our backs.<sup>32</sup>

The initial coverage of the Barnard conference in off our backs was extensive and took a clear, if not altogether forthright, position on the deepening divisions in the feminist community. In almost twelve pages of text, the publication offered an overview and editorial (at times almost indistinguishable from one another) of the plenary sessions as well as select workshops. Given ongoing debates it is not surprising that, out of the dozens of workshops offered, representing a wide range of topics, off our backs chose to report and editorialize on only three: butch/femme, radical politics of sex and politically correct/politically incorrect sexuality. Each of these was facilitated by at least one person named in the Coalition’s protest flyer. That the publication chose to highlight these workshops underscores its support of the Coalition and its critique of the conference as advocating a pro-SM agenda.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, while much of the coverage was matter-of-fact, woven throughout the reports were commentaries that indicated that each of the four authors reporting had serious concerns about what was and was not included in the conference. One author explained that she “was deeply disturbed by the conference” because “I was sitting at what was described as a feminist conference and hearing radical feminists and lesbian feminists so thoroughly attacked without any defense presented.”

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<sup>32</sup>“Barnard Discussion,” LHA; The only information I have right now is that in 1977, *off our backs*’ circulation was 15,000. It is safe to assume that by 1982, it was significantly higher than this, but I need to more research to find out. Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, YEAR), 24.

<sup>33</sup> *off our backs*, June 1982, 2-29.

In the middle of the coverage of the conference were several pages on the protest, including an editorialized description of the flyer along with various responses from those named in it, as well as interviews with Vance regarding the confiscation of the Diary. Finally, this section included a quote from Dorchen Leidholdt, a founder of WAP and vocal critic of the conference, who claimed “legitimizes the S&M movement by giving it approval of the academic world.” Several pages later, there was a similar mostly factual article about the speakout, which ended with the author’s condemnation of SM.<sup>34</sup>

For the next half year, various groups wrote back and forth to one another and their feminist audience through the pages of off our backs. The first round of responses came from Gayle Rubin, Amber Hollibaugh, Shirley Walton and Frances Doughty, all of whom identified mistakes, misquotes or problematic editorializing by off our backs authors and each of which were followed by brief responses from the offending author. There was also a “post-conference petition” in the form of an open letter to the feminist community regarding the issue of censorship vis-à-vis the Diary, followed by several letters from readers applauding off our backs for their coverage of the conference and simultaneously critiquing SM. The second round of responses included a detailed response from an author of the original articles as well as letters from Ellen Willis and Joan Nestle. This was accompanied by five pages filled with 17 letters to the editor, some applauding off our backs’ coverage, some critiquing its divisiveness, some from women heartily denouncing SM as a lesbian practice and others defending both the practice and the open discussion of it. Most of these letters were well-reasoned, articulate explanations of opinion, but as had become the norm in discussions of lesbian SM, some anti-SM critics voiced disgust and condemnation, while some defenders were aggressive

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<sup>34</sup> *off our backs*, June 1982, 2-29.

and sarcastic. In November, there was a third round of responses, this time from Samois, WAVPM and Cleveland Women Against Violence Against Women—each clarifying their groups’ purpose and agenda and responding to what it saw as possible misperceptions of the group and its members. Given the sheer volume of response, the Barnard conference clearly touched a nerve in the feminist community. But the reactions also reinforced the perception that the conference was largely a referendum on SM and in doing so added much fuel to the fire of an already heated debate.<sup>35</sup>

Shortly after the sexuality discussion in off our backs tapered off and nearly a year after the actual Conference, the Barnard issue was re-ignited, leading to a protracted discussion that lasted throughout 1983 and well into 1984. Feminist Studies, a prominent academic journal, published a letter crafted at the Lesbian Herstory Archives and signed by over 280 individuals, including the women who met just days after the conference: Dorothy Allison, Joan Nestle, Gayle Rubin and Carole Vance. A wide-range of other conference presenters, committee members, feminist academics, historians and theorists of gender and sexuality and feminist activist heavy-hitters also signed the letter.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *off our backs*, Jul, Aug-Sept, Nov, 1982. Meanwhile, one of the most interesting impacts of “Barnard” was a growing discussion around the roles of academic freedom, censorship and freedom of speech. In the wake of Barnard’s confiscation of the Diary and the Helena Rubenstein Foundation’s removal of funding from further Feminist and the Scholar conferences, a wide range of academics, some who had attended the conference and others who did not penned letters to both the Barnard Administration and the Rubenstein Foundation to voice their support for the conference’s contribution to open scholarly discussion and to advocate for academic freedom (see “Letters” file in 1982 Sex Conference collection at Center For Research on Women at Barnard College). While this issue seems to have emerged first in academic circles, it then took hold in the broader feminist community. For more discussion of freedom of speech as a feminist issue, see Chapter 6.

<sup>36</sup> “The Barnard Conference” in Notes and Letters, *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 1 (Spring 1983): 177-178. A number of conference presenters such as Ellen DuBois, Alice Echols, Bette Gordon and Cherri Moraga also lent their support via signature. Another group well represented were feminist academics like Estelle Freedman, Esther Newton, Mary P. Ryan, Ann Snitow, Martha Vicinus and Judith R. Walkowitz. Historians and theorists of gender and sexuality Henry Abelove, Judith Butler, Martin B. Duberman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick were also among the signers. Feminist activist heavy-hitters also signed on en masse with Betty Dodson, Barbara Grier, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and Minnie Bruce Pratt among some of the more recognizable names.

The letter itself, which was also printed in the July 1982 off our backs, was rather brief—less than two pages of text—and offered an overview of the Barnard conference before naming it “an important, although difficult, intellectual and political moment, a breakthrough for feminism.” The letter confirmed the conference committee’s focus on offering a space for discussions regarding sexual violence and/or the anti-pornography movement, and stated that conference “organizers were concerned that a premature orthodoxy had come to dominate feminist discussion.” Given this concern, they attempted to create “a conference that would critically examine theories of sexuality, both within and outside the women’s movement,” and “invited about forty women, representing a wide range of disciplines and perspectives, to speak and lead workshops on sexuality and feminism.” The letter alleged that in response to these choices “a series of overt, political attacks on the conference [occurred]... designed to control and confine feminist inquiry about sexuality.” It enumerated five particular incidents, including the pre-conference denunciation, the Barnard administration’s confiscation of the Diary, the Coalition’s protest leaflets, the Rubinstein Foundation’s decision to cease funding the conference, and the “very real possibility that the Barnard administration will limit the autonomy of the Barnard women’s center and curtail its ability to work with and serve the New York feminist community.” In response, academics and activists signed the letter to “protest these and all such attempts to inhibit feminist dialogue on sexuality,” which could not “be carried on if one segment of the feminist movement uses McCarthyite tactics to silence other voices.” In closing, the group reaffirmed “the importance and complexity of the questions feminists [were] beginning to ask about sexuality and endorse the Barnard conference for its efforts to explore new territory.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “The Barnard Conference,” 178-180.

Despite the claims of McCarthyite tactics and other somewhat defensive language, it seems likely that the discussion of the Barnard conference might have ended there. But immediately following the letter, Feminist Studies reprinted the Coalition's "We Protest" leaflet, which prompted a strong response from Carole Vance, criticizing the journal for spreading the misinformation contained in the flyer.

Two issues of Feminist Studies later, in Autumn 1983, the editorial board publically apologized to "our readers in general and to five women in particular" for publishing the Coalition's leaflet because although they "thought we were illustrating its 'misinformation,' ... ironically, instead, we may have granted it legitimacy through associating it with our journal." The editors of the popular feminist journal confessed that they were "insensitive in reprinting the leaflet," since it "linked its accusations to specific individuals ... and thereby attacked members of the women's movement in a personal and damaging fashion." They found this particularly problematic because "within our movement, a woman's name should be attached to a specific political-sexual stance only by self-identification." The apology continued, "[a]s feminists and as editors, we are sorry for our lack of sensitivity in failing to imagine the dangers to which those who live on the sexual fringe, like any political fringe, are exposed." The editors repeatedly underscore the connection between sexuality and politics before directly referencing the deepening divide, "We are dismayed that its publication in our pages has exacerbated and prolonged a debilitating split in the women's movement." Yet, Feminist Studies' role in the split did not end there. The apology was followed by a letter from Vance, who "was the first to protest [the] publication of the leaflet," and then by letters from the five women named in the flyers, written at the request of the Feminist Studies Editorial

Collective “to respond ... to the points raised within the leaflet itself.” The Collective felt that their “most helpful role in furthering debate ... [is through] articles that explore the complex issues surrounding feminism and sexuality,” and they invited “readers and authors to send us essays on this important topic.”<sup>38</sup>

Similar to the editorial statement, Vance’s letter used the language of attack, which is particularly interesting because most of these women openly acknowledged their engagement in these activities. Vance’s letter, for example, called the leaflet “a libelous character assassination, it ‘accuses’ women of engaging in specific sexual practices, often unpopular ones.” Both the Feminist Studies Editorial Collective and Vance were drawn in by the logic of the Coalition’s argument, seeing naming these women as sexual deviants as the problem, not the fact that that sexual deviance was considered inherently bad (and something worthy of attack and/or defense, as the case may be.) Yet Vance’s letter also addressed a number of other issues, including but not limited to the “distorted reporting” which “depicted a phantom conference, restricted to but a few issues which match the anti-pornographers’ tunnel vision concerns about sexuality.” Vance was careful to list the wide range of workshop topics, and, she noted, that “Despite all the leaflet’s hulabaloo, there was no workshop on sado-masochism.” She continued, “That such diversity of thought and experience should be reduced to pornography, s/m, and butch/femme roles—the anti-pornographer’ apocalyptic counterpart to the New Right’s unholy trinity of sex, drugs and rock n’ roll—is a travesty.” However, Vance reported that she was “confident ... that the questions and topics raised at the conference will be seen in their own right, since they are enumerated in the conference handbook .... and in the collection of conference papers.” Vance’s concern, however, was “that individuals so

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<sup>38</sup> “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 589.



maligned have no channel of rebuttal available to them and reprinting of the leaflet ... mightily exacerbates their disadvantage.” She did not stop there but persisted in her defense, articulating the very real impact the aftermath of Barnard had on the lives of the five women named:

Perhaps you are not aware of the aftermath of this leaflet for women attacked: it disrupted their lives for months. They couldn’t sleep; they were terrified; they couldn’t work. Life was in an uproar. ‘Friends’ and colleagues decided they were too controversial; anonymous calls were made to their employers; they were disinvited to feminist panels and conferences; projects in which they were even marginally involved were blacklisted.

According to Vance’s report, then, at least some of the fears the embattled women expressed immediately after the conference had come to pass. Yet, Vance reminds her reader that Feminist Studies “increased the scope of the damage, now to national and international levels.” “The point is,” Vance clarified, “this is not an academic debate which has no real repercussions in the real world.”<sup>39</sup>

The five “named” women chose to respond in a variety of ways, but all attempted to correct the Coalition’s factual inaccuracies, while reinforcing the centrality of SM to the debate at hand. Brett Harvey’s response was a brief three sentence statement that outlined that No More Nice Girls was “a group of women who came together in 1981 to fight the right wing attack on abortion rights.” It had “never taken a position on the issues of pornography and sadomasochism” but stood “for women’s freedom to express themselves sexually and oppose anyone—either the state or groups of feminists—who tries to resist that freedom.”<sup>40</sup> Dorothy Allison took a similar approach in that she submitted “two leaflets which explain what the Lesbian Sex Mafia is in its own words ... and the call for ‘a speakout on politically incorrect sex.’” The Lesbian Sex Mafia leaflet

<sup>39</sup> Carole S. Vance, in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 589-591.

<sup>40</sup> Brett Harvey in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 592.

explained that it was “a support group for women, particularly lesbians, who practice, advocate, or enjoy fantasies which involve some aspect of ‘politically incorrect sex,’” and members believed that “all sexually active women are named sexual outlaws in an authoritarian society, but that the penalties vary enormously based on questions of sexual preference, age, class, color, ethnic origin, and political activity.” According to the leaflet, LSM had a membership that ranged

from erotic fetishists to women who explore S/M fantasies, from butch/femme dykes to women who work in the sex industry, from radical feminists to women who feel estranged from the lesbian-feminist community. We have members as young as eighteen and as old as fifty-five. We include accountants, students, exotic dancers, counselors, prostitutes, educators, nurses, female dominants, factory workers, artists, and editors. Our backgrounds are as varied as our membership ... We are united in the principles of confidentiality, consensuality and safety.

Furthermore the group was “committed to the empowerment of the individual—the right of every women to use her sexual body as she chooses.”<sup>41</sup>

In her response, Ellen Willis enumerated specific corrections to the Coalition’s flyer. She wished to “correct the numerous misstatements” regarding the organization No More Nice Girls, and repeated Harvey’s description of the group. As for her affiliation with No More Nice Girls, Willis explained that while she had “publicly opposed the anti-pornography movement,” her “statements ... represent her personal views, not the policy of No More Nice Girls.” Willis further clarified, “I am in no way a defender of the pornography industry or an apologist for sexism and misogyny in pornography, as the leaflet clearly implies.” Confronting the allegations against the conference itself, Willis explained,

As a member of the Barnard conference planning committee, I can attest that the leaflet’s characterization of the conference was a vehicle for promoting pornography, s/m, and butch-femme roles is false and indeed absurd. We did want to give feminists

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<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Allison in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 601-602.

with unorthodox views a rare opportunity to be heard, but we gave this set of issues no more time or emphasis than others in a crowded wide-ranging agenda. Ironically, this leaflet and response it stirred up resulted in the issues of ‘politically incorrect’ sexual practices receiving a great deal more attention at the conference than it would have otherwise.

The remainder of Willis’ response included a few other biting criticisms of the Coalition’s flyer, at one point referring to its use of “sleazy examples.” However, it is important to note that these insults were aimed at the flyer, not the Coalition or the groups and/or individuals involved. The same, however, cannot be said for the two remaining responses.<sup>42</sup>

Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin not only echoed the other letters by correcting factual inaccuracies, but they also engaged in deeper discussions of both sado-masochism and sexual politics, while simultaneously participating in name-calling and personal attacks. Califia’s four page response noted that the “leaflet implies that I was one of the invited speakers at Barnard. I was not. I was simply an attendee, albeit a nervous and enraged one.” Many of Califia’s corrections included impassioned editorializing that railed against the anti-porn movement, for example,

WAP is apparently willing to let perverts stay in the women’s movement as long as they are searching for a cure. I spit on that invitation. I do not need to be patronized. I do not need to give my time and energy to a movement which wants me to feel shitty about how I get off.

Califia’s defensive attack marked her response and while she articulated some important theoretical and political points, it is easy to lose these amid the open hostility of the letter.<sup>43</sup>

Rubin’s letter, on the other hand, is less defensive and openly hostile, though often biting in its criticism of the anti-porn movement. Her four page response included

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<sup>42</sup> Ellen Willis in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 592-594.

<sup>43</sup> Pat Califia in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 594-597.

an explanation of her history with the women's movement, noting that, given her feminist past, it was "with some degree of bemused astonishment that I find myself portrayed as one of the Five Horsewomen of the Patriarchal Backlash." As the other respondents had, Rubin corrected factual errors in the leaflet. Then like Califia, she engaged in name-calling and criticism of her own at one point accusing the Coalition of "engaging in a vile McCarthyism." Despite these occasional insults, most of Rubin's response is an articulate, well-reasoned argument against the theories and practices of the anti-porn movement. She decried, for instance, that "An interesting, well-executed, and rather tame conference has been portrayed as some kind of wild deviant sex event. The reputations of several fine individuals have been maligned. Our precious stores of meaningful discussion, fair-mindedness, and civilized behavior have been diminished." Rubin closed her letter asking the questions of the day, though her answer is clear in her choice of words,

What is at stake in the sex debates is which side of the conflict with the women's movement support. Will feminism join the Moral Majority, the Teen Chastity Program, and Morality in Media to raise the costs of sex? Will the movement help to maintain sexual ignorance, fear and persecution.? Or will it come to its senses, update its sexual education, and recall that sexual liberation was one of our earliest, and worthiest goals?<sup>44</sup>

The discussion in Feminist Studies did not end with the responses of these five women, however. In the following issue, the Editorial Collective published a four and a half page response to the ongoing discussion by the Steering Committee of Women Against Pornography. Responding with its own corrections and clarifications, WAP defended its actions against what it saw as a conference that was "a carefully engineered trashing of WAP and other feminist organizations, theorists, and activists fighting

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<sup>44</sup> Gayle Rubin in "Notes and Letters," *Feminist Studies*, Vol 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 598-601.

pornography and sexual violence.” It claimed this was the “inevitable product of the planning sessions, marked by their good girl/bad girl dichotomy, their renunciation of feminism and their subterfuge.” WAP closed its letter with its own version of the questions of the day, and here too the answers were clear from their wording

Can the Barnard conference’s promotion of ‘sexual liberation’ be reconciled with the politics of women’s liberation? Can pornography and sado-masochism be used to achieve women’s sexual freedom? Can a critique of sexual subordination and abuse be divorced from an exploration of sexuality without that exploration serving the interests of male supremacy? Barnard’s sexuality conference was organized and attended largely by women in academia. Does it represent your politics? Whether the Barnard conference becomes a model for future conferences or sad testimony to the folly and danger of abandoning feminism is up to you.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear from both the content and tone of the responses from both “sides” in the two years after the Conference that SM was one, if not the most significant central issue in the sex debates. By the end of 1983, the divergent opinions that had been developing throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s had become irreconcilable differences. In the aftermath of Barnard, it became clear that while feminists would continue to move in the same circles and inhabit the same spaces, there would be no consensus on a feminist sexual ethics and no resolution to the Sex Wars. This ongoing war led to some interesting effects, both in the broader women’s/feminist movement and in the nascent lesbian SM community.

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<sup>45</sup> Steering Committee of Women Against Pornography in “Notes and Letters,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1984): 363-367.

## Chapter Five

### Sexual Politics—A Community with Limits and the Limits of Community: The expansion and development of Leatherdyke subculture, 1982-1993

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the lesbian SM community that had emerged in San Francisco and New York expanded, institutionalized and shifted its focus from external acceptance to internal education, community building and political activism. At the same time, this developing women's Leather community continued to re-define its parameters of inclusion and exclusion and to define its social norms through the venue of women's Leather clubs, events and publications, which both formed the market for and reflected a small but significant economy of (sometimes specifically women's) Leather goods and services. In the decade that followed Barnard, some issues of the early lesbian SM community, like anonymity and responding to the anti-porn movement, faded to the background while new themes, like community ethics and diversity emerged, as the community worked to define itself through women's events and interactions with both the gay male Leather and pansexual kink communities. Indeed, by 1993, Leatherwomen were no longer trying to gain acceptance among non-SM feminists and instead centered their organizing energy and attention on community building and education within the women's among themselves and within the larger Leather, as perhaps best highlighted in the shift from the term lesbian sado-masochist to Leatherdyke/Leatherwomen. This chapter charts the development of a distinctly American Leatherdyke culture (complete with its own institutions and communal standards) created by women's clubs, publications, events and contests, highlighting the

means and the meaning of each of these components and underscoring the significant shifts in the community that each reflected.

One of the most visible ways in which the women's Leather community expanded was through the development of women's SM/Leather clubs across the United States. While Samois and Lesbian Sex Mafia existed before the Barnard conference, there is little historical evidence of other clubs before that critical moment. However, within two years of Barnard, women's SM clubs were created in Boston (Urania and Boston Area Lesbian S/M Support Group) and Northampton, Massachusetts (Shelix), and Los Angeles, California (Leather and Lace).<sup>1</sup> Sometime between 1982 and 1988, "Clubs for Women Only" were also created in Providence, Rhode Island, Westerville, Ohio, Denver, Colorado, Portland, Oregon, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Seattle, Washington and Washington, DC. By 1993, that group had grown to include Baltimore, Maryland, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Chicago, Illinois.<sup>2</sup> Given the diversity of communities and the realities of record-keeping, it seems highly likely that others, perhaps even many other, women's SM groups developed in this period even though records do not exist or have not yet been discovered.

While these clubs represent a wide variety of communities, there are, nevertheless, important patterns that emerge from the available records. For all of these clubs, developing an organizational structure (presiding body and/or officers and by-laws) was an important project. At the same time, most clubs were highly committed to

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<sup>1</sup> Betsy Duren, "Creative Deviance: The Trails and Triumphs of a Boston S/M Group," *Outrageous Women*, Vol 1, No. 3, Summer 1984. In Pat Califia's 1982 article in *Coming to Power*, she indicates that as of 9/82, there were groups in "San Jose, New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, Portland, Philadelphia, St. Paul, Denver ... and other cities in this country." While I have no reason to doubt Califia's claim, I have been unable to find historical record of these groups.

<sup>2</sup> Sandmutopia Guardian, April 1988 (LA&M); Sarah Humble, personal interview with author, April 2008. There were also groups in other countries, like Germany, and my later study will investigate the worldwide expansion of lesbian SM, but for now, these clubs are out of purview of this project.

the idea of education for women around issues of SM, though there is a wide range of topics and strategies for that education. Some actively worked to engage in the wider public around women's SM and many encountered varying degrees of resistance from their local lesbian/feminist communities.<sup>3</sup> Participating in local gay and lesbian pride celebrations also emerges as a unifying activity and provides some of the only published pictures of these early women's SM clubs.<sup>4</sup>

While there are certainly similarities across the groups, there were also particularities in each locale. In addition to *Coming to Power*, San Francisco Samois' 1982 activities, as reflected in their newsletter, continued to focus heavily on education. The group also continued to publish fantasy stories and focused much of their reporting on continuing conflicts with the local feminist community. Their political focus included ongoing analysis of the problems of censorship and sex regulation by local, state and federal governments. At the same time an ongoing debate within the club regarding men's inclusion or exclusion ensued. Separatists objected to men's involvement in Samois' workshops while others argued for the importance of SM expertise, which, at that time, came from men.<sup>5</sup>

At roughly the same time 3,000 miles away in Boston, Massachusetts, Urania emerged as a distinct group in 1982, in part, out of a similar separatist debate. A group of women who had been meeting "every week for a month" "divided itself exactly in half" over "the question of whether bisexual women could belong," among other issues. Still the group that allowed bisexual membership worked along side the separatist group,

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<sup>3</sup> In Boston, Urania and BALSAM, for example, faced exclusion from the local Women's Center, much like Samois had in San Francisco while, in Los Angeles, Leather and Lace actively worked to ensure the availability of Samois' publication, *Coming to Power*, at local women's bookstores.

<sup>4</sup> Duren, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Samois newsletters, 1981-1982.



Boston Area Lesbian S/M Support Group (BALSM), who did not allow bisexual women, to secure meeting space and to educate the broader Boston gay/lesbian community about women's SM. One writer claimed that by the end of 1984, Urania, which had more than twenty attendees at its monthly discussion meetings, had

fulfilled several purposes. We have been a friendship network for those who come to meetings most often; a safe environment for potential scene partners to meet each other; a source of support for women who are just coming to terms with their S/M sexuality; a resource for out-of-town S/M women to call or write to; a gold mine of S/M speakers and interviewees; and a cutting edge of the feminist sexual liberation movement in Boston.

While Urania's official records are missing, this assessment of the group's first two years offers some insight into one early women's SM club, which in many ways mirrors its equally multi-faceted predecessor, Samois.<sup>6</sup>

Operating in New York City, The Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM) stands out from Urania and Samois in a number of ways. Like other groups, LSM offered educational workshops and presentations on a wide range of topics. LSM also hosted a variety of social activities, including Halloween parties, potlucks, and play parties. Almost from its inception, however, the group appears to have been specifically interested in organizing with other Leather communities in the New York City area. In 1982, LSM co-sponsored the first Leather Pride Night Auction with Gay Male S/M Advocates (GMSMA) to benefit the local gay pride parade (and continued that co-sponsorship through the 1980s and 1990s and into the new millennium) and later also co-sponsored other events like a

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<sup>6</sup> Duren, pp 17-19.

costume ball with GMSMA and The Eulenspiegel Society. These events raised even more money for the local pride parade.<sup>7</sup>

While LSM was deeply involved the broader NYC Leather community, it maintained its own membership roster and a clear set of community guidelines. By 1985, LSM had almost forty women listed on their phone contact sheet<sup>8</sup> and in a letter, most likely that same year, the group explicitly outlined a number of their policies, including how they defined membership:

LSM is a support and information group for lesbian and bisexual women interested in so-called “politically incorrect” sex---fantasy & role playing, bondage, S/M, costumes, alternate gender identities, etc. Actual experience is not required, but a real interest and an open mind are.

In addition the letter clarified that, “Applicants must have a personal interview with two LSM members and attend an orientation and safety workshop. This is to protect both OUR safety and confidentiality and that of our prospective members.”<sup>9</sup> While the letter did not include a description of what they offered their members, it clearly spelled out what they did not do. “We do not publish any material for circulation among non-members, nor are we a referral or procurement service. From time to time, however, we are able to put women in touch with similar groups closer to them geographically.”<sup>10</sup> It is striking that in this way, LSM differentiated itself from both Samois which regularly published material for public consumption and from Urania which seemed to pride itself on its ability to act as a clearinghouse of sorts. While it is not clear whether the LSM policies were constructed as a critique of the other groups’ policies and practices because

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<sup>7</sup> “LSM Schedule: September-December 1983”, LSM file, LHA; “LSM/Leather History Time Line” in Lesbian Sex Mafia 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, p. 21, LSM vertical file, LA&M; “LSM Bulletin-March/April ‘85” LSM file, LHA.

<sup>8</sup> “Phone List as of 6/14/85” LSM file, LHA.

<sup>9</sup> “Thank you for your interest in LSM” LSM vertical file, LA&M.

<sup>10</sup> “Thank you for your interest in LSM” LSM vertical file, LA&M.

the group's records are missing, given the mobility of ideas and people involved in the emerging women's SM community it seems likely that there was some sort of relationship among these groups. This may also be the reason behind LSM's explicit description of the group and individual's roles in the group: "We are not political ... in any sense of the word ... although we realized our existence as a group at all can be construed as a political statement. No member may speak for LSM, or as an official representative-except in specifically authorized cases."<sup>11</sup> Whether or not these policies were put in place to avoid issues other groups had faced may never be known, but it is clear from LSM records that they developed a particularly unique model of a women's SM club.

In Los Angeles, California, Leather and Lace also offered an alternative model of a women's SM club. The group was a network of smaller groups that met in a variety of locales. While the group offered numerous educational "rap groups," and produced a rather informal newsletter that employed a playful tone (which was quite different than Samois' newsletter though both included fantasy SM porn), Leather and Lace was a highly structured organization. It included officers and, eventually, a mediation council that was put in place to "create a binding agreement between members who could not otherwise resolve their conflict."<sup>12</sup> Leather and Lace was also the only group whose records indicate the employment of uniforms; indeed the design, purchase and proper wearing of the uniform was a regular part of the group's newsletter.<sup>13</sup>

Back in San Francisco, sometime during 1982, Samois disbanded for reasons that are known only to the individuals involved—though community folklore indicates that it

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<sup>11</sup> "Thank you for your interest in LSM" LSM vertical file, LA&M.

<sup>12</sup> Jo Hoening, Interview with author, June 23, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Leather and Lace, "Chain Letter" Volumes I & II, No date, Leather and Lace Vertical File, LA&M.

had something to do with the problems of creating a nationally renowned publication and/or a set of incredibly painful personal conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Less than two years later, the Outcasts formed out of a group of some of the original Samoïs women, including the indefatigable Gayle Rubin who became the first coordinator of the group, operating under the alias “Princesse.” The Outcasts’ records provide more specific examples of the major trends of women’s SM groups highlighted above, namely community definition and standards, social and educational activities and political awareness and activism.

In the November 1984 newsletter, Rubin reported that The Outcasts had decided on several key policy issues, which were major issues of contention in The Outcasts’ now-defunct predecessor, Samoïs: confidentiality, membership, sex parties and male attendance. In terms of confidentiality, the group declared that any member “who betrays the identity of anyone else in the group to anyone not in the group will be kicked out” and that the “mailing list is confidential and is only available to officers of the group.” Membership, meanwhile, was defined as “open to any women interested in women-to-woman S/M” and clarified that the group welcomed “transsexual women” and women who did not “identify as lesbian” because they were “more interested in what women do than how they define their identities.” While crafting an inclusive policy in terms of identity, the group wanted specifically to exclude women who were “unsafe, irresponsible, violent or dishonest.” While the group was “not open to men,” members did decide that men could be allowed “to participate in programs” either to share S/M expertise, or at times as guests or co-sponsors of an event. However, male attendance

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in Gayle Rubin’s “The State of Our Union” article in The Outcasts February 1986 newsletter, Rubin stated that she was hesitant to join The Outcasts because she was “reluctant to risk ever again going through the kinds of trauma that accompanied the end of Samoïs ... I know from bitter experience that the women’s S/M community is capable of ugly interpersonal dynamics and a high degree of institutional self-destruction.”

required approval of the steering committee and notification of the membership “so that those women who would find this upsetting will not be subjected to any unpleasant surprises.”

Additionally, The Outcasts defined themselves as “a social and educational group” which would not “host sex parties.”<sup>15</sup> The group offered a significant number of educational workshops, which, most notably, included classes on “fisting” and “humiliation” taught by Janus founder Cynthia Slater, indicating her continued involvement in the women’s SM community. Other programs in the first few years included piercing, “Whips and Whipping Technique,” knives and bondage. Also significant is that early on, the group regularly offered Orientations, classes on SM and safety as well as programs such as “AIDS and Safe Sex for Women.” The Outcasts also advertised events and trainings of the San Francisco Sex Information and related community sex-educational opportunities. But education was not the only focus or activity of the group as they also hosted a variety of social events; from fashion shows to potlucks, the group gathered often. And members attended a variety of broader gay and Leather community events, including but not limited to the Gay Day parade, the Folsom Street Fair and a women’s night at the San Francisco Eagle (a predominantly gay-male Leather bar).<sup>16</sup>

The Outcasts regularly disseminated information of interest to members via their newsletter. The newsletter occasionally supplied members with sexual fantasy material via sexually explicit stories and poetry. In addition, the newsletter irregularly offered an

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<sup>15</sup> “The Outsasts” [sic], November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1984, p. 2-3, Newsletters—1984, Outcasts Collection, GLBTHS. It appears that the group specifically deliberated and came to consensus on these issues because they were salient points of contention within Samois, the group’s forerunner.

<sup>16</sup> Outcasts Newsletters, 1984-1987.

advice column, “Hints for Hellraisers—Ask the Master,” and personal ads in which members could solicit the input of the columnist and cruise for dates, respectively. Ranging from book reviews to recommendations on where to buy leather clothing and SM equipment (often referred to as toys), the newsletter was also source of vital information on how to procure the necessary accoutrements of Leather. Over the course of the first four years of the group’s existence, there is a marked increase in the advertisement and discussion of both published SM sources as well as individuals and businesses who catered to members of the SM community, indicating not only the expansion of this community but also the recognition of it as a viable purchasing market.<sup>17</sup>

The Outcasts’ newsletter also provided space for airing and analyzing issues of political concern, which ranged in both scope and topic. Some focused around the group itself such as in March of 1985, on “the night of the slave auction a group of black & third world women objected to the word *slave* saying that it was insensitive to the experience of blacks in the U.S.” Interestingly, there is no record of whether or how the group responded to the critique, which could indicate that the issue became too divisive or that it was ignored. Since other divisive and sensitive issues were regularly reported on, it seems reasonable that the concerns of these women were ignored, at least on an institutional level.<sup>18</sup> Other issues addressed included a “Community Alert: Women’s Parties in Peril” that highlighted the problem of low attendance at local public play

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Outcasts Newsletter, April, 1985. The confidential nature of The Outcasts’ records makes it all but impossible to discern the racial makeup of the group at this time, but it seems reasonable to assert that this lack of institutional discussion of issues of race indicates that much of the membership was white—though of course it could be the case that there were women of color who chose not to raise the issue publicly, or that the issue was in fact raised and, for any number of reasons, not reported in the newsletter.

parties and several discussion of etiquette at such parties. In terms of the group in particular, issues such as low interest and involvement in business meetings (which were separate and distinct from program meetings or social gatherings) and smoking at meetings. Another reoccurring theme was the security of the membership both in terms of bringing outsiders to meetings and sharing the group's newsletter or contact lists with non-group members, as evidenced by ongoing reminders of the groups privacy and security policies and the addition of a line to the masthead "TO BE READ BY OUTCAST MEMBERS ONLY."<sup>19</sup>

In addition, the newsletter highlighted some national issues, both within the Leather community and in the broader USAmerican culture. The November 1986 newsletter included a detailed report of the first International Living in Leather conference sponsored by the National Leather Association (NLA) while the August 1987 newsletter offered a similarly detailed report of the NLA's May "A Leather Celebration for Men and Women," both of which were held in Seattle. The Outcasts sponsorship and involvement in the inaugural International Ms Leather contest held in San Francisco in April of 1987 was also widely covered. There were discussions as well about organizing against censorship, whether within the feminist community or by the religious right or the government—in one instance advocating that members sign-up "to be put on the Bay Area Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (BA-FACT) new legislative lobbying mailing list." At other times, the newsletter included advertising for various organizations and events centered on advocating for rights and freedoms for sexual minorities. More

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<sup>19</sup> Outcasts Newsletters, 1984-1987.

specifically, throughout 1987, The Outcasts encouraged its membership to attend the 1987 March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights.<sup>20</sup>

While women's SM groups were one way that the community expanded and institutionalized in the decade after Barnard, another major was the massive increase in the volume of published material by and for lesbian sado-masochists. While *Coming to Power* was published before Barnard, its impact lasted throughout the decade, with references to it appearing in a wide variety of sources. This seminal work in the genre was quickly followed by numerous others.<sup>21</sup> In 1983, a group of women created "A Journal for S/M Lesbians" named Cathexis, after Barbara Ruth's 1977 Lesbian Tide article. The inaugural 16-page journal included poetry, several short stories, a reprint of a response to the Nation's review of *Coming to Power* and *Against Sadomasochism*. The editors called for written and artistic submissions from SM dykes, and suggestions of articles that could be reprinted and included ads and announcements, including one for LSM. According to the opening paragraph, they wanted "this journal to be a place for us to explore the politics of passion, as well as the transformation of our powers through S/M." The women also "wanted to hear from and build community, find ways to meet, support, and enjoy each other." How long this journal existed is unknown, but it is clear from the first issue that it mirrored most early women's SM groups in that the purpose was both to create political space for lesbian SM and community for women interested in it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Outcasts Newsletters, 1984-1987.

<sup>21</sup> While some include Bad Attitude and On Our Backs among these publications, because they are not specifically dedicated to SM, though they often employ and discuss it, I have decided that it is more appropriate to discuss these publications in terms of the broader feminist and gay/lesbian rights movements, and therefore they are investigated in detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>22</sup> Cathexis, Samois file, GLBTHS



These same goals are evident in early issues of Outrageous Women. Subtitled “A Journal of Woman –to-Woman S/M,” the journal was first published winter 1984. The well designed 20-page journal clearly outlined its intention, audience and purpose in an introductory paragraph:

*Outrageous Women* seeks to provide a safe and lively space in which to discuss, debate and fantasize. We’re open to any women who is interested in woman-to-woman SM. Our goal is to be all-inclusive with respect to techniques, interests, experience level, intensity and sexual identity. *Outrageous Women* will come out quarterly and will offer erotica, political theory and analysis, practical information, reviews, graphics, photos, letters, opinions, news, poetry, cartoons, personal experiences and humor.

Indeed, the journal included all of these and more, such as an advice column, transcripts of a panel held in Boston sponsored by Urania and BALSAM, and advertisements for other publications and businesses that would be of interest to SM women. The journal also included the first anonymous personals in which interested readers directed their response to a box instead of the writer. This is the first of many changes that Outrageous Women (OW) marks in terms of the women’s SM community.<sup>23</sup>

While the editorial group explicitly states that the journal would include “political theory and analysis” and the ten issues available for analysis were inherently and implicitly feminist, only one article directly addressed the ongoing debates about SM’s place in feminist ideology. Some articles make reference to various forms of resistance from other feminists, but the journal is by no means focused on that conflict and it assumed that SM and feminism are compatible and, indeed, that most of its readers were feminists. For example, at the beginning of every issue starting with Volume One, Issue Three, the journal included the following disclaimer:

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<sup>23</sup> *Outrageous Women*, Vol.1, Issue 1, Winter 1984.

Note: Sometimes OW will print a piece of fiction, such as a lesbian rape scene, in which consent is not overtly shown. This is not to condone real-life rape, slavery, or coercion of any kind. We want to emphasize that mutual consent in real-life S/M is imperative. S/M fiction, though, we regard as consensual by definition: the reader is free to stop reading at any time. In fact, such “non-consensual” stories may be compared to the fantasy of non-consent that enlivens most consensual S/M scenes. As the issue of consent in fiction is a controversial one, we invite your feedback on the matter.

This approach marked an important change in that the writers in Outrageous Women did not constantly remind the reader that the stories are fictional and that people who act out these stories in real life are doing so consensually. This is in stark contrast to earlier publications, like *Coming to Power*, in which almost every story had an explanation of the consent involved.<sup>24</sup>

Outrageous Women's third issue marked a number of other shifts. Most striking was the inclusion of photos of actual SM women, in traditional Leather regalia as well as engaged in SM activity, which stands out as the first of that kind of imagery to be published. The women represented in the pictures are all young women, probably somewhere in their twenties to early thirties, and the majority are white, though it is important to note that in both of the photos on the cover there is a black woman. One shows her facing the camera and in the other she is posed in a dominant position over a lingerie-clad white woman laying on a bed. The racial make-up of the pictures are significant and hints some measure of diversity in that particular community of lesbian sado-masochists, though with such little information available, it is difficult to hypothesize much more about either the racial make-up of the community or issues related to acceptance of difference.

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<sup>24</sup> *Outrageous Women*, Volume 1, Issue 3, Summer 1984

That same issue included the history of Urania discussed earlier as well as letters from readers. Significant among those letters is one penned by Gayle Rubin, the newly crowned Princess of The Outcasts. The excerpted letter includes Rubin's observations about the early days of Samois, advice to the group for getting in contact with other area SM groups and the assertion that she was "happy to see OW and hope it does well." She noted, "We now have the beginnings of an S/M press," which reminded her of "the old days when the lesbian press consisted of two newsletters and one paper." OW continued to be a central part of this developing SM press for at least four years. In that time, there were a few noteworthy additions to the journal's regular content. In issue 1:4, the journal included a Fantasy page which offered contributors the opportunity to explain, in 500 words or less, what they saw "when the lights go off or the vibrator goes on?" While three of the four fantasies in the initial column were by one author, the feature became a regular in the journal and exposed a wide variety of women's sexual fantasies.

Issue Four was an ad by a photo lab in Connecticut that guaranteed "UNCENSORED" photo processing. This would have been of particular interest to women engaged in SM activity, as photo labs were legally obligated to report various kinds of images delineated as porn.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent volumes maintain the overall structure and content of the first, with a few interesting additions. The first issue of Volume Two published a wide variety of graphics, including photos and drawings of women engaged in SM. It also presented a growing array of advertisements, including but not limited to straightjackets, tit clamps, guest houses and publications. This issue also ran a consumer column which supplied readers with contact information, descriptions and reviews of a

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<sup>25</sup> *Outrageous Women*, 1:1. For more on the existing porn laws, see Chapter Six and The Meese Commission Report.

wide range of businesses of interest to readers. This illuminates, as did the Outcasts newsletters, the growing recognition of an SM economy.<sup>26</sup>

That expanding community and economy came with issues and problems of its own, which was reflected beginning in Volume Three, when Outrageous Women included a “new column for people to air viewpoints, opinions, and whatever inspires you that doesn’t fall under the category of stories and fiction.” The editors were careful to point out, however, that “the opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.” The first column, “Ethical Considerations in the S/M Relationship,” exhorted readers to embrace the motto of the authors of a book on non-competitive sports: “Play hard; play fair; no one hurt.” Offering her own interpretation of these ideas, the author theorized on a best practices scenario for women engaged in SM activity. The second contributor picked up on this theme though with a much more specific topic: people commenting on and/or intruding into other’s power-dynamic based scenes. Indeed, the author concludes by warning readers that “those who wish to keep their health to start behaving in a properly respectful manner around other people’s slaves and submissives.” The third installment was entitled, “Some Sexual Deviants Mistakenly Think They Are Sex Addicts; I was One.” While each of these topics is interesting in and of itself, together they mark a shift in the women’s Leather community at large—by fostering the creation of community standards and the public airing of those issues. While various women’s SM clubs may have had similar concerns, they were for the most part handled within the club, portraying a unified identity to the larger feminist, gay/lesbian and mainstream societies. In the interest of community education and communication, OW editors encouraged women to discuss problems openly within the

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<sup>26</sup> *Outrageous Women*, 2:1

publications that could be read by anyone. This risked inviting criticism both within and beyond the community. But it also reinforced the growing trend in the women's SM community to focus on itself as a community rather than on outsiders who might find their practices problematic or objectionable.<sup>27</sup>

Over the next few years, a number of other publications emerged that echo the themes highlighted in the previous discussion of Outrageous Women. In 1986, an artist known only as Naomie L.K. published The Erotic Coloring Book I: Women into Leather. A 25-page bound volume, it consisted of a wide variety of sketches showcasing women engaged in sundry SM activities, including but not limited to blindfolds, bondage, bootlicking, caning, piercing and spanking. Of interest is the diversity of the women represented in terms of both gender presentation, which ranges from high femme to butch, and racial/ethnic terms, with women appearing to be of both African and European-American descent. Here again, there is a hint about racial diversity, but like with OW, it is difficult to be able to say more about either the racial make-up or the politics of the community at this point. Most significantly, there is no discernable pattern in terms of gender or race on the one hand and position within the scene on the other. This appeared both purposeful and significant. That is, tops and bottoms are masculine, feminine and androgynous as well as appear to be black and white. Yet, all of the women illustrated, regardless of gender, race or position were drawn with incredibly large breasts and almost Barbie-like bodies. While it is difficult to assess the meaning behind this choice, the idealized woman's body, despite the artist's obvious sensitivity to the diversity of women in the SM community, is both noticeable and, perhaps to some,

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<sup>27</sup> *Outrageous Women*, Volume 3, Issues 1-3, 1988.

disturbing.<sup>28</sup> There is little text in the booklet other than a dedication to “Devioune” who was “loved & bonded!” and the title page, which included the name of the book and the artist’s signature and mailing address, in Pasadena, California. The back cover also warned “sale to minors prohibited!” While the booklet’s production offers another indication of the growing women’s SM economy, the disclaimer also makes clear that legal repression of such imagery was of deep concern to SM women.<sup>29</sup>

Both of these conditions reverberate through Pat Califia’s 1987 “S/M Resource List for Women.” The 18-page list includes contact information on businesses and groups in over thirty categories. Some specifically address the need for gear and toys and range from “Corsets” and “Medical Paraphernalia” to “Vibrators and Dildoes.” Other topics addressed particular sub-communities, such as “Amputees” and “Transsexualism,” or sexual fetishes and SM activities, including “Infantilism” and “Tattoos/Piercing.” Also delineated were a variety of women-centered spaces such as “Clubs or Bars Friendly to S/M Lesbians,” “Lesbian S/M Publications” and “Women-Owned Leather Businesses” as well as groups for gay men and pansexuals. The section entitled “Photo Processing” did not offer contact information, but instead provided a paragraph-long warning that “court cases have interpreted federal law to require photo processors to turn any obscene material in to law enforcement officials.” Furthermore, Califia noted, “material which features minors (or models who appear to be minors) will DEFINITELY be handed over to police.” Califia encouraged readers to inquire with individual

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<sup>28</sup> Though, as KD pointed out to me, this idealized feminine body could be the artist’s reference and/or homage to the gay male Leather icon, Tom of Finland, which came out of the gay male physique craze beginning in the 1960s and presented an idealized butch masculine body for consumption by gay men. Still, given the sensitivity to other kinds of diversity, the lack of different kinds of women’s bodies is significant.

<sup>29</sup> Naomi K., *Erotic Coloring Book*, (Pasadena, CA, 1986). Author’s personal archive, also available at LA&M.

companies before sending in negatives as to whether or not they “view S/M material as a problem” even if they advertise that they are uncensored. Furthermore, Califia directed that those wishing to have such pictures developed to include “signed statements that all models are over 18 (21 to be safe), and that the activity shown is POSED, CONSENSUAL, and did NOT inflict bodily harm on any of the participants.” Califia concluded with what seems to be a tongue-in-cheek line, “Personally, I’ve bought a Polaroid.” The growing SM economy and the impact of anti-pornography laws are certainly at the center of this particular publication.<sup>30</sup>

Califia’s other writings during this time period also echoed the patterns emerging from other women’s SM publications. In 1988, Califia edited *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual*, which included information on both physical and emotional safety via a series of short articles. Topics of physical safety such as “Vaginal and Anal Penetration,” “S/M First Aid,” and “Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Lesbians” were covered. There were also multiple articles about emotional safety for both partners (top and bottom) and several pieces that addressed how to effectively deal with dominance and submission.<sup>31</sup> Like other publications of the period, the book was clearly contributing to the creation of community standards and norms and was making these issues available for public consumption and possible critique.

That same year, Califia also published *Macho Sluts*, an incredibly rich volume of feminist, sex-positive “erotic fiction.” While the introduction of the book spoke to the politics of the time, and her philosophy on the importance of writing good porn, the rest of the book is comprised of stories that cover a wide range of people, desires and fetishes.

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<sup>30</sup> Pat Califia, “S/M Resource List for Women” *The Power Exchange: A Newsleather for Women*, 1987; found in “Power Exchange” vertical file in LA&M.

<sup>31</sup> Pat Califia, Ed. *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* (Boston: Lace Publications, 1988).

The book wove together stories of, “S/M fantasy in previously taboo territory—an incestuous Victorian triangle, a lesbian’s encounter with three gay male cops, a leatherman who loves to dominate other topmen, a lucky girl who gets to take on eight topwomen, and more.” These diverse themes were brought together in one way by the implied consent of those involved. Building on philosophy of Outrageous Women and standing in stark contrast to the fiction in *Coming to Power*, Califia offered no justification of or apologies for the dirty, raunchy sex scenarios in *Macho Sluts*, save to “generate some of the hope that leather dykes need as much as they need raw courage to survive in a hostile world.” And that it might serve as “a recruitment posted, as flashy and fast and seductively intimidating as I could make it.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to more widely available written information, one of the most significant developments in the SM women’s community, during the mid-1980s, was the first International Ms. Leather contest. Held in San Francisco in March 1987, the contest had twelve contestants and closely mirrored the International Mr. Leather contest begun in the mid-1970s. Audience members were treated to on-stage interviews and displays of formal wear and fantasies, in which contestants acted out sexual scenarios, all judged by a diverse panel of prominent SM community members. At the end of the night, Judy Tallwing-McCarthy was “sashed” (winners received a leather sash with the title emblazoned on it instead of a crown), the first International Ms. Leather (IMsL). Over the next year, McCarthy became a visible spokeswoman for the community, traveling to a wide variety of fundraisers and political events across the country. The most significant event by far was the March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, where McCarthy

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<sup>32</sup> Pat Califia, *Macho Sluts*, (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), back cover and p. 10.



spoke at a pre-march rally. With that appearance, Leatherwomen had not only a spokeswoman but also a voice on the national gay rights agenda.<sup>33</sup>

Around that time, as the community continued to define and refine itself throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a significant shift in terms of self-identification. While many still employed the term lesbian sado-masochist, terms like SM dyke, Leatherdyke and Leatherwomen started to make their way into the communal lexicon. While there are no published sources that analyze or even discuss or note this shift, it highlights the community's move away from fighting with anti-SM feminists about the feminist credentials of Leather/SM sex and instead a new focus on community definition and building. Whether this was a conscious shift may never be known, but it is significant that Leather/SM now came first in the self-identification for at least part of this community of women, and it reflects that the primary identification was no longer with the lesbian-feminist movement but was instead rooted in the larger Leather community, albeit with an assumed feminist ethos.<sup>34</sup>

This identification with the broader Leather community is reflected in women's involvement in a new publication emerged that specifically catered to "America's S&M/Bike/Levi-Leather Club" community. The Leather Journal began publishing in 1987, and by Issue 13 in 1990, Karen Kircher began writing "For Women, By Women," a column "specifically for news about the women's leather community—our clubs, organizations, events" and "maybe some gossip." As promised, the inaugural column did

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<sup>33</sup> Marcus Harvey, "International Ms. Leather," *Bay Area Reporter*, March 25, 1987, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> It is also significant to note that for the six year period between the introduction of IMsL and the massive change that came with the internet in 1993, the shift was incomplete—with groups and publications employing the terms almost interchangeably at first, though it should be noted that into the 1990s and the new millennium, the term Leatherdyke and Leatherwomen became the major terms, at least in the USAmerican context.

cover news from a variety of clubs and events, including but not limited to Leather and Lace, an overview the Ms. Sacramento Leather contest and announcements about upcoming Ms. Leather contests at both the local and national level. The column also featured a number of photos from those events. Subsequent columns, which ran regularly through Issue 19 and then sporadically through Issue 28, followed this same format of news and photos from women's clubs and events.<sup>35</sup>

While the column is an important indication that women were becoming a significant part of the broader SM community, there are many other such indicators in the Leather Journal as well. Significant coverage was afforded to women's leather contests, with each of the International Ms Leather (IMsL) winners being interviewed at the beginning of her reign and activities being covered throughout her tenure. Similar coverage was afforded to the reigning Ms. National Leather Association. A wide variety of local contests were announced and reported in the journal as well. The nomination and selection of the Leather Journal's Woman of the Year was also reported, as was the NLA Woman of the Year, which in 1989 was Cynthia Slater, founder of Janus and major proponent of the San Francisco women's SM community, who died of AIDS shortly after receiving the award.<sup>36</sup>

While prominent individual women were regularly featured in The Leather Journal, there are a few other ways in which women figure in the publication during its first few years. With sporadic occurrence, individual women, sometimes in pairs, can be seen in photographs at events of gay Leather and mixed SM groups. Furthermore, women's clubs were also listed in the directory at the end of the journal, though

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<sup>35</sup> *The Leather Journal*, May 1987-May 1992.

<sup>36</sup> *The Leather Journal*, Issues 9-23, 1990-1992.

significantly, they were almost never included in the club briefings section of the *Leather Journal*, which reported the activity of various Leather groups throughout the country, even when there was not the “For Women, By Women” section. Yet, women were represented in the *Leather Journal* in other ways, as well.<sup>37</sup>

Some female titleholders and other prominent community activists were also wrote to The Leather Journal to make women’s voices heard in the broader community. Jan Lyon, who was Ms NLA in 1989-90 and The Leather Journal Woman of the Year 1990 wrote May-June 1990 issue urging members of the community to engage in education both on a personal and community level. She also encouraged readers to work with non SM people, including, notably, “battered women’s shelters that the differently pleased community is Safe, Sane, and Consensual instead of abusive.” Lyon also advocated direct political action through voting and volunteering to ensure individual and collective sexual freedoms. Lyon later helped spearhead the Beat Jesse! campaign to raise money for the defeat of North Carolina Sendor Jesse Helms. Various aspects of the campaign were covered in The Leather Journal and although Helms was re-elected, the contributions of Leather/SM people, in coalition with numerous other groups, made the race close and helped to show that there was strength in numbers and solidarity. Lyons further exhorted the readership to continue to resist censorship and advocate for sexual freedoms via the political process. Letters were also published from the likes of Pat Califia, Susie Shepard (IMsL 1989) and Gabrielle Antolovich (IMsL 1990), among others.<sup>38</sup> Through The Leather Journal, then, it became clear that women in leadership positions, whether as titleholders or activists, played an important role in incorporating

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Letters,” *The Leather Journal*, Issue 15, May-June 1990, p. 8; “Letters,” *The Leather Journal*, Issue 19, 1991, p. 6. *The Leather Journal* Issues 9-23, 1990-1992.

women's ideas and concerns into the Leather Journal and the broader SM community. Also significant is the very public nature of women Leather titleholders, and other community leaders. This, when put together with the increasing visibility of women's publications which included women's real names and identifiable pictures, indicates that at least for some women, the anonymity and privacy that was so important in the early lesbian SM groups like Samois and LSM were no longer major concerns. This may have been in part because of the growing acceptance of gays and lesbians and the focus on coming out as a political act of the gay/lesbian liberation movement, but also seems connected to the overall community shift away from seeking approval from the women's movement and towards connecting with the broader Leather/SM movement.

While there was significant focus on connecting with the broader Leather/SM community, there continued to be women-only events. In part sparked by their exclusion, either explicit or implicit, from other women only spaces, four women created a new event called Colorado Outdoor Leather Dykes (COLD). The mid-July 1991 event, which was held at a campground owned by a local gay male biker club, drew "fifty-four S/M and leather women from as far away as the East Coast and Holland" to the Rocky Mountains. The weekend consisted of educational classes, "vendors ... contests (scavenger hunt, tug-o-war, obstacle course, bondage), twelve-step meetings, and play of all types," as well as "[h]uge meals" which "put to shame" the food served at other women's festivals "both for quality... and quantity." Other activities included informal networking at communal showers and a Sunday afternoon auction which resulted in Raelyn Gallina acquiring "the largest amount of the only legal tender 'fuckbucks', which she used to bid on a pass to next year's COLD '2'." On Sunday, organizers awarded

“Hottest Scene” to “The Gang Rape On the Hill” which, according to the caption of the accompanying photo, “[n]early everyone participated in or watched.” The Outcasts were awarded “Most Club Participation,” though Kircher, attendee and article author, was careful to point out there were a number of other clubs represented at the event. On her trip home, Kircher reflected, she was “filled with a sense of bonding and community that will bring me back.”<sup>39</sup> While it’s unclear from the historical record whether or not the second gathering occurred, the women’s community to grow.

Powersurge, “The 1<sup>st</sup> International Lesbian S/M Conference,” was held in Seattle on Labor Day weekend, 1992 and had been organized because

Lesbians interested in S/M and fetish practices are a large and visibly growing group within all of our communities. Although often included and powerfully vibrant in the many lesbian and gay contingents and conferences in the past few years, Leatherwomen have their own questions, answers and concerns that need to be addressed in their own arena.<sup>40</sup>

The weekend long event included a variety of performances, facilitated workshops—that promised “No Experts” as well as “play parties and an Amazon Feast.” Between 300 and 350 women attended the event, which by all published accounts was largely successful and fostered education and community building. Of course, no event is without its issues and the central one at Powersurge was sex/gender identity and lines drawn around such identities.<sup>41</sup>

In a May 1992 update on Powersurge, the organizers stated that the “conference is open to all Lesbians and there will be no gender police. If you consider yourself to be

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<sup>39</sup> “COLD: When Hell Freezes Over,” *The Leather Journal*, Issue 25, September 1991, pg. 38-39.

<sup>40</sup> “Press Release: Powersurge” Powersurge Vertical File, LA&M.

<sup>41</sup> “Press Release: Powersurge” and “Program” Powersurge Vertical File, LA&M; Caitlin Sullivan, “Powersurge a Wild Success,” *The Leather Journal*, Issue 40, November 1992, pg. 16-17.

Lesbian then you are cordially invited to participate.”<sup>42</sup> Sometime between then and the middle of the conference, this policy was clarified, at least for the dungeon parties and the Amazon Feast, to be a more specific “dick-in-the-drawer rule.” According to Joan who wrote an article about the conference for *Brat Attack* #3 (in the same issue that discussed FTM transsexuals in the Leather community), “Some distinctions were made regarding gender for attendance at [these events.] The women of Powersurge said, if you cannot slam your dick in a drawer and walk away, then ... [these events] are not available to you.”<sup>43</sup> It is clear that a central issue of the women’s Leather community was, again, who could and should be included in the community, not only in terms of desired object choice (that is: lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual), but also in terms of one’s sex/gender. In the 15 years since Samois’ creation, the community had confronted, moved away from and then come back to this central issue of who is in and who is out—which not only highlights the evolving nature of this community but also the complexity of identity politics.

Issues of identity and community standards also played an important role in one of the last lesbian SM publications to be developed. Subtitled “Do-It-Yourself S/M,” the inaugural edition of *Brat Attack* from the Bay Area of northern California promised “NO EXPERTS! GUARANTEED,” and explained that it was created “because a few leather dykes got tired of whining at each other and decided to Do Something Constructive.” They wanted to make space for “all the things we talk about around our kitchen tables” and offered it for “leatherdykes and whoever else finds us useful.” Like many other publications by SM women, the 45-page magazine included letters, interviews,

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<sup>42</sup> “Power-Surge Update” Powersurge Vertical File, LA&M.

<sup>43</sup> Joan, “Powersurge” *Brat Attack* #3, Fall 1992, pp. 24-25.

information on safety and a variety of discusses on issues pertinent to the leather community, including but not limited to the emerging “Safe, Sane, Consensual” paradigm, the unequal respect and prestige afforded tops and bottoms within the scene, and setting and negotiating limits. The first issue included a pull-out section of the Outcasts Safety Guidelines, a glossary, a list of Bay Area resources and advice on how to be a pervert on a budget. The ‘zine style meant that the publication was chock full of graphics, illustrations and comics as well as ads for area businesses serving the SM community.<sup>44</sup>

While much of Brat Attack’s tone and content reflect earlier women’s SM publications, there is one significant departure, the ongoing reflection about a variety of political issues within the women’s community. While Outrageous Women included some individual observations about problems or conflicts, it is clear from its first issue that Brat Attack was interested in tackling larger, more politically-sensitive issues. For example, in the very first issue, the magazine included a four and a half page article by Pat Califia entitled “A House Divided: Violence in the Lesbian S/M Community.” The article ran with the disclaimer that it was “intended to begin a discussion in our community. Women’s S/M support groups can reprint it, but it is not for publication elsewhere.” Califia made an impassioned plea for SM women to break through the denial that their community “like any besieged minority, has its own problems with violence” despite the fact that they “expend a lot of energy trying to educate the outside world about S/M” and “make the distinction between what we do and assault and battery.” Califia argued this was incredibly important not only because “if we don’t clean up this mess ourselves, it will be used and turned against us by people who don’t

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<sup>44</sup> *Brat Attack*, Issue #1, No date, 1991.

really care if our lives are free of danger or no,” but more importantly, because “women we love will continue to suffer, perhaps even lose their lives.”<sup>45</sup>

Califia theorized a myriad of reasons why SM women perpetrate violence and suggests that there is no discernable pattern in terms of identity of abusers, arguing that it was both tops and bottoms, butches and femmes. She then outlined the ways the community has attempted to deal with these issues in the past, ranging from self-policing and blaming the victim to retaliation and isolating the involved parties, and concluded that each proved inadequate. Instead, Califia argued, the community should turn toward legal authority for intervention, get involved with “grass-roots projects that provide services to victims of sexual assault,” “practice a nonviolent form of confrontation when someone has been identified as violent,” and encourage the perpetrator to get therapy. If these measures were not successful, Califia trepidatiously suggested, they should be followed by ostracism, but only as a last resort. She concluded with a challenge: “As a community of female sexual outlaws, we need to start paying attention to our ethics and our honor. The good life does not merely consist of getting laid as often as possible.”<sup>46</sup> Not only does Califia’s article speak to the larger trend in the women’s Leather community of openly acknowledging problems and issues within the community, it also grappled with central issues of power, consent and violence that had been at the heart of the feminist debate around SM since the early 1970s. While it seems reasonable to assume that discussions specifically grappling with violence within the lesbian SM scene had been taking place for years, and indeed there are allusions to such conversations in various groups’ newsletters, it is significant that the first issue of this Leatherdyke ‘zine

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<sup>45</sup> Pat Califia, “A House Divided: Violence in the Lesbian S/M Community.” *Brat Attack* #1, ND, p. 10-14, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



included the first published acknowledgement of this both very real and highly theoretical problem, and it underscores this shift in the community towards dealing with difficult issues.

Also included in the first issue was an article highlighting the experiences and concerns of self-identified fat women within the SM community. The two contributors agreed that, overall, fat women were more accepted and embraced in the SM community than the larger society and conjectured it might be because size is equated with power or “that SM dykes are open minded enough to see beauty beyond the narrow standards set by this culture.” Whatever the reason for the difference, both authors felt more accepted and sexier within the local SM scene than they did in the broader lesbian community, although they admitted that while they felt “positive vibes in the SM community, there are of course still ‘complications.’” Among those complications was difficulty finding large size fetish gear, particularly for feminine women (as opposed to large size clothing for masculine or butch-identified women), though they solved this problem by shopping in stores for drag queens. Also problematic was the assumption that fat girls can take more “because they have more padding,” which they reported is not always the case and advise against believing or acting on such an assumption. Finally, they noted that “tops don’t seem to approach us.” While they conceded that it might not have anything do with their size, or at least that it was not “overt fat-phobia,” “maybe it’s a more subtle power-dynamic around size and identity.” The article ended with a flirty challenge “to play with the big girls.” While very different in tone and content from Califia’s article, it too

demonstrates that the women's SM community was seen by its members as strong enough to be able to withstand constructive criticism.<sup>47</sup>

This reflection and criticism continued in subsequent issues of Brat Attack. Issue Three included a number of deeply political discussions. "Talking Class: Working Class S/M Dykes Lay Down the Line" provided a transcript of a discussion by a group of working class women as they shared their experiences and theorized about class differences specifically within the Leather community. Highlighting the admissions fees for Leather events, the problems of work-exchange, and the centrality of expensive clothing and gear to the culture, these women offer a nuanced analysis of the ways in which class difference creates hierarchies within the community, a problem compounded by the ignorance on the part of more affluent community members about the specific issues working class women faced.<sup>48</sup>

This issue also published a similar transcript of a discussion of another subgroup, female-to-male transsexuals. The article illustrates the complexity of the sex/gender system as it played out in the daily lives of five individuals who were assigned female at birth and decided to change their biological sex to more closely match their internal sex/gender identification. The group focused on their personal experiences coming to terms with their transsexuality, their sexual attractions, and their complicated relationships to their bodies. They also discussed how their families and friends dealt with their transitions. Much like the first issue, Issue Three demonstrates a growing trend

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<sup>47</sup> Christine, "Heavy SM: Fat Brats Speak Out" *Brat Attack* #1, ND, pp. 18, 19, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Christine, Ed., "Talking Class:" *Brat Attack* #3, pp. 38-45.

in the women's Leather community to unpack carefully issues of difference and controversy within the community.<sup>49</sup>

The issue of sex/gender as a marker not only of personal identity but also the basis for community inclusion is at the heart of an article published by Pat Califia in Venus Infers, the last of the major women's SM publications to appear. Established in 1993, it was much more formal in tone and structure than previous newsletters and journals and stands in particular contrast to the zine format of Brat Attack. While some of the content mirrors those of earlier publications, with the inclusion of political discussions, interviews, photography, erotic fiction, poetry and cartoons, the layout and production of Venus Infers was much more polished and professional in appearance. This suggests strongly that the women who developed Venus Infers, including Pat Califia, Karen Kircher and ten other women, wanted to help legitimate the women's Leather community, and at the same time deal with difficult issues, like inclusion and exclusion.

The first article in the publication was a discussion about the inclusion of transsexuals in the women's community. Using Powersurge as a case study, Pat Califia unpacked and critiqued the complex problem of gender identity and sexual orientation in the women's SM community in her article, "Who is My Sister?" In the seven-page discussion, she argued against the inclusion of female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, stating that

at some point, it becomes appropriate for an FTM to stop attending women-only events. If someone is taking male hormones, letting their facial hair grow, and has taken a male name, changed their legal documents to say they are male, and expects to be addressed by a male name and male pronouns, I cant really visualize that person as being a lesbian.

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<sup>49</sup> Deva, "FTM" *Brat Attack* #3, p 8-12, 15-19.

At the same time, Califia contended that male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals should be included: “MTFs take female hormones, love their tits, often undergo painful surgery to create female genitals, and live full-time as females and dykes.” Califia also addressed the issue of bisexuality, explaining that “you can’t really make bisexual leather women stay away from a conference. You can only force them to be silent about their true identities.” Instead, Califia offered the policy she had been employing for a decade, “I welcome any woman who is interested in doing S/M with other women, as long as she’s polite and doesn’t engage in unsafe play.” With the article Califia challenged the women’s SM community to think critically about the way it was defining lines of inclusion and exclusion, but also demonstrated that the issue which had created so much conflict in Samois continued to haunt the community well into the 1990s.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, the community was on the verge of another sea-tide of change as the Internet offered SM women possibilities never before available. The first issue of Venus Infers also included an article about “netsex” by Lizzard Amazon. In “Talking Dirty With Net Sluts,” she explained the benefits of online community for “dykes who are isolated geographically—living in Nebraska—or isolated physically—by dissatisfaction with their body, by struggles with health, or with transgender issues.” Amazon also outlined numerous other ways netsex could be helpful, particularly for women into SM, including the safety of anonymous play, lack of limitations other than that of the imagination and the ability to explore personas, genders or roles without changing one’s public identity or risking too much. Additionally, she stressed that the Internet allowed for an open exchange of ideas, facilitating her own, others’ and community growth. She

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<sup>50</sup> Pat Califia, “Who is My Sister?” *Venus Infers*, Vol 1, No 1, p. 4-7, 34-35.

contended that the “anarchic, dialogue-focused nature of the Internet allows a tremendous amount of discourse about sex and S/M to happen 24 hours a day, every day—discourse that we need in order to remain a growing and health community.” In order to support that discourse, Amazon offered a basic overview of the Internet, including how to get connected as well as mailing lists and bulletin boards that would be of particular interest to SM women. Thus it is clear that, as early as 1993, the Internet was becoming a new forum for community building, and while the Internet was just emerging such a place of possibility, it would not be long before it had a profound impact on this and other communities.<sup>51</sup>

While the Internet would change the community in the coming years, much had already changed in the women’s SM community in the decade after Barnard. As groups had formed across the nation, a distinct community evolved, and with it a small but growing economy that included publications, services and contests. Part and parcel of that evolution was a shift from engaging with outsiders to focusing on internal community issues, like ethical standards and group membership, which was reflected in the move from lesbian sado-masochist to Leatherdyke. Ironically, as the community was becoming more internally focused, the issues raised by the problem of SM began to inform and transform the broader women’s movement and the country as a whole.

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<sup>51</sup> Lizzard Amazon, “Talking Dirty with Net Sluts,” *Venus Infers*, Vol 1, No 1, p. 28-30, 46.

## Chapter Six

### Unresolvable Tensions SM, feminism and American paradoxes

In addition to the Leatherdyke community which developed in the decade that followed Barnard, the Sex Wars profoundly affected diverse aspects of American life. A new lesbian porn industry and sex positive feminism was created while anti-porn activists allied with the religious right to ban porn, only to be challenged by libertarian first amendment advocates and feminists against censorship. Meanwhile, the women's community struggled with the real-world implications of the visibility of SM women, particularly as it applied to "safe space" at womyn's music festivals. And, towards the end of the decade, sexuality studies emerged as a new academic field with far-reaching political implications that were deeply rooted in the debate over lesbian SM. This concluding chapter demonstrates the significant historical impact of lesbian SM, as an issue, and Leatherdyke women, as a community, on American culture in the 1990s and into the new millennium. At the same time, this chapter highlights how the problem of SM revealed faultlines not only in feminist and gay/lesbian liberation struggles, but those of American liberalism.

Shortly after Barnard, the anthology *Against Sadoomasochism* crystalized arguments of the anti-SM women's movement by publishing reprinted essays from a wide range of activists. These included well-known feminists like Kathleen Barry, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Robin Morgan and Alice Walker, essays from up and coming feminists like Judith "Judy" Butler and John Stoltenberg, and numerous articles written by local

women to the Bay Area's feminist publication Plexus, as well as some original essays from lesser-known authors. While the content of the arguments echoed the discourse discussed in earlier chapters, the book is nevertheless historically significant because it both compiled this set of diverse responses and, like *Coming to Power* had done for women interested in SM, allowed women who did not have access to major feminist publications to engage in the debate.<sup>1</sup> With the Barnard debacle being played out the in pages of *Feminist Studies* and the publication of *Against Sadomasochism*, it is clear that the Sex Wars were far from over.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, shortly after the drama reignited by Feminist Studies died down, another group of feminist activists added even more fuel to the fire when they started the lesbian porn magazine, On Our Backs. Lovers Debi Sundahl and Nan Kinney had migrated from Minnesota to San Francisco sometime in late 1982 or early 1983 because they wanted real images of women having sex (and doing SM) and because they had read *Coming to Power* and knew Samois was located there. They quickly became active in Samois, and though the group disbanded shortly thereafter, they worked with a Samois friend to produce the first issue of their magazine. It was funded in part by the proceeds from lesbian-only strip shows and showed real lesbians engaged in real sex—something that had never been done on such a scale, due in part to the power of the anti-porn movement. In response to that movement, Sundahl and Kinney chose to name their publication On Our Backs as a play on off our backs which had been (and continued to be) virulently

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<sup>1</sup> Also of note in this volume was a “Letter from a Former Masochist” in which the author explains that for years she was into SM, and then after the relationship turned abusive, she realized that the SM (which she had previously enjoyed and to which she consented) was always violence. It is significant, too, that this is the first piece in the book after the Introduction, offering legitimacy to the book by offering an example of someone who had false consciousness (liking SM) and then came to her senses (SM=violence), and by extension suggesting that women into SM were simply brainwashed.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Ruth Linden, et al. Eds, *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well, 1982).

anti-porn/anti-SM. Sundahl and Kinney first sold the magazine at the San Francisco Gay Pride fair, and later sold it through Samois' mailing list and bookstores, though they, too, were confronted by anti-porn censorship at various feminist bookstores.<sup>3</sup>

Within a few years, On Our Backs had become one of the most important magazines in the lesbian community (though of course, not without continued controversy) and helped contribute to the creation of sex-positive feminism. Among other things, the magazine helped create acceptance around for the use of sex toys. Not only did it carry the "first national advertisement" for silicone dildos, together with another sex-positive publication, Bad Attitude, On Our Backs helped created demand for both the item and desire for a new kind of lesbian sex. One lesbian at the time commented, that in part because of these publications, "After years of deferring to the clitoris, the cunt has been making a comeback, and now can emphasize its presence by demanding whatever toys it wants."<sup>4</sup> Susie Bright, one of On Our Backs' founders had this to say about her magazine, though it is more appropriate to also assign credit to the other publications of the time like Bad Attitude and Outrageous Women as well:

[We] created the first mainstream acceptance of 'women's erotica,' the practical steps to finding one's G spot, and having a free 'n' easy attitude toward[s] dildos and vibrators. We taught the world how to use a strap-on. We made sex fun and smart for women, something that was entirely female self-interest.<sup>5</sup>

It is also significant that while Outrageous Women focused largely on SM, the other two publications also had their fair share of SM-positive articles, poetry and photography, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. This further demonstrates the central role of lesbian SM in the creation of sex-positive feminism. While it is outside the purview of

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<sup>3</sup> Christi Cassidy, "Opening Pandora's Box," *On Our Backs*, Vol 19, Issue 1, June/July 2004, p. 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Peg Byron, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Dildos," *Voice*, March 5, 1985, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Susie Bright, "Working Girl," *On Our Backs*, Vol 19, Issue 1, June/July 2004, pp. 30-31.



this study, it should be noted that these early sex-positive publications and discourses contributed to the development of certain groups of Third Wave feminists who more fully embraced diversity.

As this nascent sex-positive feminism was developing, the broader women's community continued to debate SM's place—quite literally. Throughout the course of the 1980s SM became a major issue for women's music festivals, including the largest and oldest Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF), held every August since 1976 on privately owned land in northern Michigan. The Land (as it was and still is affectionately known to attendees) covers 650 acres, owned by the Festival's producer Lisa Vogel. During the festival, the facilities included three stages (for midday, afternoon and night concerts), a communal kitchen, various service tents and areas (medical, workshop, etc.), a crafts area where women sold clothing, artwork and the like, a community center, and tented areas specifically designated for young girls, women of color and over 40.<sup>6</sup> Much of the usable land, however, was designated for camping for the 6,000 plus attendees—and, as a means for accommodating the needs of a wide diversity of women, included specifically designated areas for women who were disabled, Over 40, sober, quiet and “loud and rowdy.” Such accommodations also similarly reflected at the concert stages, where spaces were designated for women with disabilities, those who wanted to smoke and/or partake of other chemical pleasures.<sup>7</sup> That MWMF was organized to be as inclusive of as many women as possible is clear; it is also part of the reason that SM became such a hotbed issue at the festival throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Wickie Stamps, “Trouble in Paradise,” *The Advocate*, August 28, 1990, p. 56-58., MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS; W.H.I.P.s, “Michigan: An Experience for the Differently Pleasure – On the Land,” flyer, MWMF, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS.

<sup>7</sup> W.H.I.P.s.

the 1980s. On one hand, SM women wanted to be able to enjoy the festival *and* their sexuality. On the other hand, non-SM women argued that they should not have to be subjected to the sights and sounds of SM, which some found scary, threatening or disgusting. Because of the unique nature of the space (no walls, no buildings), there was no way to ensure complete privacy for anyone. Anti-SM women argued that this meant that SM activity should not be allowed to take place anywhere on the land. SM women, on the other hand, argued that a space could be designated for their activities and those who were not interested could opt to stay away from that area.<sup>8</sup>

The debate around SM's place in feminism writ large and the festival in particular had simmered at MWMF for years and had received some minor coverage in the feminist press and various workshops at the event itself. But it was a series of altercations at the 1989 Festival that caused the issue to boil over. Even before the sixteenth annual festival commenced that year, it was clear that a real conflict was brewing as a group identifying themselves as "Seps Against Sado-Masochism" circulated a flyer outlining their intent to disrupt SM activity and invited "Separatists to join ... in developing tactics to make Michigan a less than pleasure experience for sado-masochists in 1989." They urged like-minded women to send the message that "we're finished with merely talking ... and determined that THIS YEAR we're going to serve notice to them that they're no longer welcome at OUR music festival."<sup>9</sup> While the group did not include specifics about how it would enact this agenda, for fear that the mailing list might include some sado-masochists, nevertheless they were quite clear that they planned on taking direct action.

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<sup>8</sup> S.E.P.S. "SEPS Against Sado-Masochism: Plan for Michigan!!!," undated flyer, 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS; Outcasts letters, July 1989-July 1990, "Issues" vertical file of Outcasts archive, GLBTHS.

<sup>9</sup> S.E.P.S. "SEPS Against Sado-Masochism: Plan for Michigan!!!," undated flyer, 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS.

In response, The Outcasts circulated the letter with a statement encouraging solidarity and connecting interested women with Women Hedonists Into Pain (W.H.I.P.s) who had been organizing SM activities at MWMF since 1983. In 1988 and 1989 (and perhaps other years as well) W.H.I.P.s produced a pre-festival newsletter with a schedule of events (including things like an Erotica Slide Show, Leatherwoman Contest, Workshops and Parties), information on where the group camped (complete with a map of the festival land to help direct interested women to their self-designated space).<sup>10</sup> Once again, the stage was set for drama.

While the '89 Festival was in progress, W.H.I.P.s entered into negotiations with a festival mediator to deal with the fact that the space W.H.I.P.s had claimed seemed to limit other women's access to common spaces. Amid reports of harassment by anti-SM women (both verbal and written graffiti, likely by those associated with S.E.P.S.), negotiations between the SM women and the festival broke down, leaving the issue wholly unresolved.<sup>11</sup> A few months later, however, festival producers circulated a three-page statement articulating a new policy that prohibited "certain activities organized by the S/M community," which included taking over "community space for private parties or scenes, or to define community campgrounds or fire pits for that group's use." Further, the Festival staff would "interrupt any parties that are started, and we will require consideration and support for community space."<sup>12</sup>

While the policy seems extreme and politically exclusionary, the fact that the Festival had earlier attempted to negotiate with the SM women cannot be ignored. For

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<sup>10</sup> W.H.I.P.S., 1988 & 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Stamps, in *The Advocate*, August 1990, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> W.W.T.M.C., "A Disussion of S/M at the Michigan Festival," February 1, 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS (widely reprinted in the feminist press—see *off our backs* and *Diversity*, for example.)

instance, the 1988 W.H.I.P.s newsletter informed interested SM women that there was the possibility of “an official campsite, sanctioned by the Festival and organized by some well-meaning individuals who appear to have been manipulated into agreeing to an ‘invisible’ inaccessible (to the differently abled) campsite.”<sup>13</sup> But, the group argued, “We don’t want to be shipped out to the remote campsite they’ve set up. We’re tired of being told to ‘do it in the bushes’.” The producers’ policy statement reflect this earlier attempt at resolution,

We would clarify guidelines and receive agreements from the spokewomyn that community campgrounds wouldn’t be marked as S/M campgrounds, and that parties or scenes wouldn’t be organized in general Festival spaces and tents. Each year these agreements would be ignored, at least by some womyn...<sup>14</sup>

So, the policy prohibiting SM resulted from SM women’s unwillingness to accept anything less than full visibility and a central space at the Festival (reflecting earlier tendencies toward inflexibility).

Yet, this breakdown in negotiation was characterized by pro-SM activists as pure discrimination. Indeed, within months of the policy, The Outcasts responded with a statement of its own, accusing the Festival of discrimination, decrying their concessions to the demands of “a stridently vocal minority” and calling on the Festival, “as leaders in the lesbian community ... [to make] a stands for pro-choice sexuality.”<sup>15</sup> In coverage of the ’89 Festival, The Advocate, a national gay/lesbian publication, reported on the controversy, stating that Festival producer Lisa Vogel believed that “S/M activity has no

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<sup>13</sup> W.H.I.P.s, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> W.W.T.M.C., Feb 1990, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Baker for The Outcasts, “To The Organizers of the Michigan Women’s Music Festival,” June 15, 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS (widely reprinted in the feminist press—see *off our backs* and *Diversity*, for example.)

place at the festival,” but Vogel’s quote below suggests that the failed negotiation led to the policy, not personal feelings against SM:

Historically, this group of S/M women have not been real cooperative. ... We asked them to not come together in group scenes in community space, and they refused. If the only basis these S/M women have for their participation at the festivals is to do these public scenes, Michigan is not the appropriate place for them to be. They should organize their own festival.<sup>16</sup>

Again, a failure to compromise (this time, apparently, largely on the part of SM women) led to the escalation of the issue. At the 1990 Festival, SM women upped the ante, continued to organize parties “in a remote corner of the land designed to be out of every wandering separatist’s way,” held unsanctioned workshops and, according to one published first hand account, hired “an unmarked, low flying plane ... to drop fliers about the controversy into the waiting arms of women all over the grounds.”<sup>17</sup> In November of that year, Vogel and Boo Price released another statement designed to “correct the most commonly printed pieces of misinformation” that had ostensibly appeared in the press coverage and perhaps in the “flying flier.” In addition to contending that they had created numerable opportunities for discussion and education around the issue of SM, the producers also clarified that, despite requests to do so, they would not “designate a section of the land for S/M camping or for group sex scenes.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, from reports of the Festival, this space and these activities did in fact exist.

Three years before Clinton’s now infamous failure to integrate the armed forces, lesbian feminism had created its very own version of don’t ask, don’t tell. In its own strange way, the quiet acceptance of the presence of SM accompanied by public

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<sup>16</sup> Stamps, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Pepper, “15<sup>th</sup> Michigan Music Festival Attracts 8,000 ‘Womyn,’” unknown publication, late summer/fall 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Vogel/Boo Price “Michigan Women’s Music Festival responds to recent press on S/M and the Festival,” November 1, 1990, MWMF File, Outcasts Archive, GLBTHS.

disavowal that marked Michigan's SM policy is how feminism writ large "resolved" the issue of SM, by leaving it unresolved.<sup>19</sup> The lack of resolution highlights not only the difficulty of the feminist project, but at the same time, the American liberal project of maintaining individual rights to freedom of expression, on one hand, and protection on the other.

While MWMF found a way to move forward, the unresolved nature of the problem of SM led to real consequences for SM women in the form of violence and harassment. In March 1994, Female Trouble, a Philadelphia-based group, reported the findings of their nation-wide survey of mostly lesbian SM women. The thorough and well organized report concluded that "56% [of the 539 respondents] reported some form of violence (harassment, discrimination, physical assault) over their S/M lifetime within the lesbian community because of their S/M orientation," forty-four percent of that had happened in the last year. The group also reported that "25% of the women" had faced physical assault, largely in the form of "being physically confronted in a threatening manner," though six percent of women had been "shoved, jabbed, chased, spat upon or objects had been thrown at them because of S/M orientation." This violence against SM women speaks to the power of the anti-SM discourse of the 1980s to inform attitudes and actions well into the 1990s. Furthermore, it is clear from this report that even as women's community tried to ignore SM, anti-SM attitudes continued to pervade that culture and negatively impact the lives of SM women.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> While it is outside the purview of this study, it is significant that the next year the Festival was at the center of another controversy around the exclusion of transsexual women and that much of the discourse used to justify it was the same or similar, both in tone and content, to the arguments against including SM women.

<sup>20</sup> Female Trouble, "Violence Against S/M Women Within the Lesbian Community: A Nation-wide Survey," March, 1994, Philadelphia PA, pp. 8-10. Female Trouble vertical file, Leather Archives and Museum.

While the issues of porn and SM continued to deeply divide the women's movement, they also took center stage in national politics. Feminists Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin worked together in 1983 to draft legislation in Minneapolis, Minnesota that defined pornography "simply and unequivocally, as a form of violence against women," and as such proposed to amend the city's civil rights law to allow injured parties (conceived exclusively as women) to bring civil suit against "a particular person, place, distributor, exhibitor." Lest the connection between sado-masochism and the anti-porn ordinance movement be obscured, it is important to note that Dworkin-McKinnon defined pornography as "the sexually explicit subordination of women" which might include "the portrayal of women 'as sexual objects, things, or commodities; ... who experience pleasure in being raped ... or in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as ... bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual.'" The continued use of SM imagery to define pornography is clear evidence that the ongoing debate about SM within the women's movement helped spur on the anti-porn activism of Dworkin-McKinnon, and suggests that the war within feminism was being taken to a larger stage. The Dworkin-McKinnon statute passed the Minneapolis City Council in the winter of 1983, though it was later vetoed by the mayor because of the implications of the ordinance on First Amendment rights.<sup>21</sup>

Soon after, a similar action in Indianapolis led to a fascinating historical irony in which anti-porn feminists worked together with conservative Republicans and member of the religious right to ban porn. The Mayor enlisted the City-Count Council member Beulah Coughenour, who was at the time an activist in the Stop ERA movement. She, in

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<sup>21</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The New Porn Wars," *The New Republic*, June 1984, pp. 15-20.

turn, recruited both Catherine MacKinnon and right-wing preacher Greg Dixon. This stunning political alliance resulted in the passage of the ordinance in May 1984.<sup>22</sup> Yet, anti-porn feminists were not the only ones interested in the ordinances; some of the most vocal opponents of the Dworkin-McKinnon-inspired statutes were feminists who had been vocal supporters of sexual freedom and/or SM, such as Ellen Willis, Carole Vance (coordinator of the Barnard conference), Nan Hunter, Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia. The legislative appeal of the Indiana case was spearheaded by the Indiana Civil Liberties Union and supported by Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce (FACT), a new organization these women formed in response to the anti-porn ordinances.<sup>23</sup> FACT submitted an Amicus Brief in the case, strongly objecting to statute on a wide variety of bases, including but not limited to the “definition of pornography in the ordinance [was] unconstitutionally vague and overbroad” and argued that “existing constitutional protection for sexually explicit speech should be enhanced, not diminished.”<sup>24</sup> While the federal judge in the Indianapolis case later ruled it unconstitutional, the campaign had already begun spreading across the country.<sup>25</sup>

As the anti-pornographers waged their campaigns, anti-censorship feminists met them at each locale. In communities like Madison Wisconsin and Cambridge Massachusetts, among others, sex-positive feminists formed local chapters of FACT in order to offer an alternative analyses to Dworkin and McKinnon. In Madison, a group of

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<sup>22</sup> Lisa Duggan, “Censorship in the Name of Feminism,” *Voice*, October 16, 1984, pages unknown.

<sup>23</sup> Duggan, “Censorship...” Gayle Rubin, “Letter to FACT,” June 5, 1985, FACT vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>24</sup> FACT, “DRAFT Brief Amici Curiae of Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce,” April 8, 1985, FACT vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The New Porn Wars,” *The New Republic*, June 1984, pp. 15-20.



twenty-five activists, including several men, formed the local chapter and published a four-page position statement, identifying themselves as

activists dedicated to eradicating sexism and violence against women, ending the physical and psychological victimization of children, and achieving true sexual equality and freedom of choice in the pursuit and enjoyment of alternative lifestyles and sexual preferences which do not do violence to others.

They objected to the proposed resolution because their concerns about sexism and victimization were being co-opted by the Right who did not have “a commitment to ending the subjugation of women” but instead were “inspired by a perverse moral imperative that seeks ... ultimately the excision of all literature and conduct deemed offensive to conservative and fundamentalist sensibilities.” Thus, they argued, “If this proposal succeeds, we expect some people in this community will turn their attention and efforts to the literature and art of feminists, gays, lesbians, socialists, humanists, liberals, and others espousing unpopular views, beliefs and lifestyles.” The group ultimately opposed the measure on the grounds of free speech, contending that the ordinance sought “to regulate thought, expression, and ideas.”<sup>26</sup>

In each community, FACT, in alliance with other free-speech activists, won their local campaigns against censorship, although it is hard to know whether that was because the voting majority were pro-free speech, anti-woman or pro-porn (or some combination of those). What is most significant for this project is the central role that key figures of the Sex Wars played in the debate and the way in which these campaigns, like the controversy at Michigan, underscore the tension between free speech and protection. The tension between free speech and protection so clearly highlighted in the controversies

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<sup>26</sup> FACT “Position Statement,” Madison WI, no date, FACT vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

surrounding these local ordinances remained central to the politics of the pornography as the debate went national.<sup>27</sup>

In response to growing public concern about the proliferation and impact of pornography, in 1985 President Ronald Reagan's Attorney General Edwin Meese 3<sup>rd</sup> named a commission to conduct a thorough investigation of the effects of pornography. The eleven member Commission was led by Hendry Hudson, a Virginia prosecutor, who had succeeded in curtailing pornography in his county. It was formed to update the findings of a 1970 Presidential commission report which found no connection between pornography and violence, because Meese believed that pornography had become more violent and widely available.<sup>28</sup> Investigators visited "adult" stores, read published articles on studies about pornography and considered over 3,000 letters from the public.<sup>29</sup> The Commission also held hearings in six cities, at least a few of which involved testimonies by anti-porn feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon, as well as reports from local feminist groups. In particular, FACT "had observers present at all Commission hearings, and ... testified ... in Chicago." They claimed, through their literature, that the "Commission was appointed to appease the demands of the religious right" and outlined their opposition to Commission's objectives:

As feminists, we are especially appalled that this latest attempt to restrict freedom is being disguised as an effort to "protect" women. We believe that the problems women have with sexism in pornography are best addressed by increasing women's power to control our lives. We also need resources and services to help us regain control when we are abused, and redress against those who discriminate against us or threaten us.

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<sup>27</sup> Elshtain; Duggan "Censorship..."

<sup>28</sup> Philip Shenon, "Meese Names Panel to Study How to Control Pornography," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1985, p. A21.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Pear, "Panel Calls on Citizens to Wage National Assault on Pornography" *The New York Times*, July 10, 1986, p. A1.

What we are being offered instead is a return to the pedestal where vice squads and prosecutors can “protect” us from dirty pictures, and tell us what to read and see.<sup>30</sup>

For FACT, freedom of expression clearly took precedence over government-imposed “protection.” Instead, they argued, it was personal power, supported by government and cultural norms, that would lead to women’s real security. This employment of the notion of power as a positive force speaks to their departure from anti-porn/anti-sex activists who saw power as negative and abusive.

After a year, the Commission published its findings to much public attention. The almost 2,000 page report released in July 1986 concluded that exposure to pornography, particularly violent and sado-masochistic imagery, was causally related to perpetration of violence. In response, it called for a large-scale crackdown on the pornography industry because of its negative impact on women and children. The Meese Commission’s recommendations included strengthening federal laws regarding the sale and distribution of pornography, the creation of various law enforcement task forces specifically designed to enforce existing obscenity laws, a wide variety of recommendations to state and local jurisdictions regarding laws and sentencing, and a suggestion that citizens become watchdogs in the fight against pornography. The report was applauded by feminist groups like N.O.W (though it cautioned that the recommendations could be used against gays and lesbians) and members of the religious right like Jerry Falwell. But others condemned the censorship the Commission encouraged in favor of supporting First Amendment rights. While the impact of the Meese Commission and the controversy surrounding it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is, nevertheless, significant that

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<sup>30</sup> FACT flyer, New York City, no date, FACT vertical file, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

feminists were key players on both sides of the debate and that, again, issues of freedom of speech and protection were central to the controversy.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the effects of the Sex Wars on the feminist community and Americans' understanding of pornography via the Meese Commission, perhaps the most unexpected result of the feminist Sex Wars was its contribution to the emergence of the new academic field of sexuality studies. Sexuality studies emerged in the early 1990s, in part, out of the perceived failure of the broader women's studies to offer sufficiently applicable theories in deal with issues of sex and sexuality. Indeed, Gayle Rubin's critique of feminism's difficulties of theorizing lesbian sado-masochism which led to her theorizing in "Thinking Sex," became a standard starting point for scholars in sexuality studies. The article is included as an article in a number of sexuality studies anthologies including but not limited to *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (where it is the first article) and *Culture, Society and Sexuality*. Furthermore, Rubin's article can be found in innumerable Sexuality Studies course syllabi across the country.<sup>32</sup> Even though Rubin's article is at the core of theorizing sexuality, the centrality of SM to her analysis is almost never acknowledged even though it was at the very heart of her groundbreaking work. In her 1984 publication, and every reprinting since, the discussion of lesbian SM comes at the end of the article, as if her thinking about the issue served only as an application of her theories rather than the cauldron from which they emerged.

Rubin's thinking, and with it the theories and practice of SM women, also led in part to the creation of sexuality studies as a scholarly pursuit distinct from women's

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<sup>31</sup> Pears, A1; Philip Shens on, "Justice Dept. Pornography Study Finds Material Tied to Violence," *New York Times*, May 14, 1986, p. A17; "Excerpts From Final Report of Attorney General's Panel on Pornography," *New York Times*, July 10, 1986, p. B7; Editorial, "Defeated by Pornography," *New York Times*, June 2, 1986, p. A16.

<sup>32</sup>

studies. Academics in the 1990s and early 200s responded to Rubin's call for a new paradigm. Not surprisingly, these first programs were in San Francisco and New York. City College of San Francisco launched the first lesbian and gay studies program in 1989.<sup>33</sup> Two years later, the City University of New York opened the Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies (CLAGS) as the first university-funded research center "dedicated to the study of historical, cultural, and political issues of vital concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and communities."<sup>34</sup> In addition to the growing AIDS epidemic and the gay rights movement, the timing of the development of these programs indicates a relationship to the Sex Wars and its ripples during the 1980s and beyond. Yet, there is no recognition of the centrality of lesbian sadomasochism to the theorizing and organizing that came out of the feminist community during this period.

There are many possible interpretations of this silence—although I am inclined to interpret it as both institutionalized sexism and fear of difference. Sexuality studies was not taken seriously (at least to the extent that it is, which is still liminal) until it was embraced by some big name male academics like Jonathan David Katz, who became the first tenured faculty in queer studies in the country and Martin Duberman, who founded CLAGS.<sup>35</sup> Sexism at the institutional level was compounded by sexism on a personal level on the part of at least some of the key male figures. Indeed, in commenting on his stalled negotiations to fund an endowed chair during the summer of 1997, veteran gay activist Larry Kramer referred to a Yale provost as "that termagant woman."<sup>36</sup> Tapping

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<sup>33</sup> LGBT Studies "Department History," [http://www.ccsf.edu/Departments/Gay\\_Lesbian\\_Bisexual\\_Studies/department\\_history.html](http://www.ccsf.edu/Departments/Gay_Lesbian_Bisexual_Studies/department_history.html) (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> CLAGS, "About CLAGS," <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/clags/about.shtml>, (accessed October 26, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/03\\_04/kramer.html](http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/03_04/kramer.html), (accessed October 26, 2010).

into cultural messages of women as nagging, Kramer's sexism is palatable, and hints at the possibility of sexism at play on a larger scale in terms of the visibility and success of women and women's issues in LGBT turned queer turned sexuality studies. Fear of difference, of course, is much harder to concretize. Though the fact that women like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick became heavy hitters in queer studies while women like Gayle Rubin, Lisa Duggan and other decidedly pro-sex and/or pro-SM feminist academics were not hints at this possibility. Regardless of the reason, it is nevertheless clear that lesbian sado-masochism, both the theory and practice, is willfully ignored as one of the major contributors to the creation of the field of sexuality studies.

It is also clear that the Sex Wars in general and the issue of lesbian sado-masochism in particular had long-term and wide-ranging effects on American society and culture. Despite the small size of the community and deeply marginalized status of the women engaged in lesbian SM, the issue struck at the heart of feminist theorizing and ethics and also illuminated broader conflicts in American culture between individual rights to self-expression and equal protection, diversity and communal responsibility. So, perhaps it should come as no surprise that the War, like many of the central struggles at the heart of the American paradox, had no clear winners. And although the issues are unresolved, the wide variety of effects of the War (from sex positive feminism to increased scrutiny of the porn industry, and from feminism's quiet tolerance of SM to the creation of sexuality studies) demonstrate that, in the end, feminists who engaged the critical issue of SM, regardless of their position, really did go "where angels fear to tread."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, "A Report on the Sex Crisis," *Ms. Magazine*, March, 1982, p. 88.

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