

**PASSION, POLITICS, AND POLITICALLY INCORRECT SEX:  
TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LESBIAN SADOMASOCHISM IN THE  
USA 1975-1993**



by

Anna Robinson

Submitted to the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University  
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in  
Women's and Gender Studies

Main supervisor: Francisca de Haan (Central European University)

Second reader: Anne-Marie Korte (Utrecht University)

Budapest, Hungary

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration of the largely underexamined history of lesbian sadomasochism (SM) in the United States between the mid-1970s, when the first organised lesbian feminist SM groups were founded, and 1993, by which time public debates about lesbian SM were becoming less visible. I engage with feminist discourses around lesbian SM within the so-called feminist sex wars of the 1980s, tracing the sometimes dramatic rise to prominence of lesbian SM as a feminist issue. Entwined in this web of controversy, I assert, is the story of a perceived fundamental split in the feminist movement between those who believed SM was patriarchal, abusive and violent, and those who saw it as a consensual expression of sexual freedom and liberation.

This thesis draws upon extensive original archival research, and contains close readings of letters to the editor from lesbian publications and sex magazines of the time, as well as and the personal papers of key figures and organisations, such as Dorothy Allison (founder of the lesbian SM support group LSM) and Shelix (a woman-to-woman SM group in Northampton, MA). My study charts the trials and tribulations of lesbian feminists, anti-pornography feminists, and lesbian sadomasochists of different stripes in 1980s America as they grappled with notions of identity, desire, consent and how exactly to best embody the classic feminist statement that the personal is political. I show that new, related identities of “lesbian sadomasochist” and “pro-sex feminist” emerged during the “sex wars” through conflicts over what makes a “good” feminist and a “good” lesbian, in and out of the bedroom.

## Acknowledgements

It is such a pleasure to be reflecting on all the intellectual and emotional support I have received in the preparation of this thesis. Firstly, I would like to thank my main supervisor, Professor Francisca de Haan. Her commitment to my thesis, generous guidance and attention to detail have motivated me to succeed and encouraged me to become a better scholar. Professor Anne-Marie Korte's advice has been exceptionally helpful too, asking thought-provoking and challenging questions that pushed me intellectually. Thank you both.

I also wish to show my appreciation to the incredibly helpful archivists whom I met in person (Colette at the LHA, Angela at the Mazer Archives, Kelly Wooten at Duke, Keith at ONE, plus countless others with whom I corresponded by email). An extra special thanks to Ciara Healy in Durham for her being the funniest librarian in all of North America, and to all the friends whose couches I slept on during my research trip.

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Those who looked at drafts of the thesis, I truly cannot thank you enough. Julian Gill-Peterson, Mark Taylor, and Jonathan Burgess' readings gave me invaluable food for thought. The endless intercontinental text messages and then beers in New York pondering passions and politics with Julian Gill-Peterson and Tara Tabassi have enriched this thesis too. Thank you also to Whitney Stark for her keen copyediting skills, Jess Miley for her help with the images, Elisabeth Laird for formatting assistance and Steph Doole and my family for the constant moral support.

I could not have had such a fun and intellectually enriching two years without my Utrecht family and Budapest friends, especially Vasso Belia, Annemijn van Marlen, and Marianna Takou, and the DRAB collective.



The image on my cover is a photograph of Fisch by E.J. Doubell in a deserted underground garage in Brixton in 1992. I appreciate her kind permission to let me use it here.

I also wish to acknowledge the financial support that made this thesis possible from the Erasmus Mundus Category A Scholarship, the CEU MA Travel Grant, and the Duke Feminist Theory International Travel Grant, as well as the Visiting Scholar Award from the LMA which will permit me to continue research on this topic in 2015-16.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of figures.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of abbreviations .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Introducing Lesbian Sadomasochism .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Methods and materials .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Aims.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Structure .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Limitations .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>1.1 Sadomasochism and lesbianism.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>1.2 SM in feminist and lesbian histories.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>1.3 Key secondary texts .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>1.4 Theoretical Framework and Approach .....</b>	<b>32</b>
1.4.1 Queering gay and lesbian history.....	32
1.4.2 Foucault and the history of sexuality .....	34
1.4.3 Sex panics .....	36
1.4.4 How to write queer feminist history?.....	37
<b>Chapter 2 Historical Context and the Emergence of Lesbian SM .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>2.1 Sadomasochism’s history .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>2.2 The US feminist movement 1970s-1980s.....</b>	<b>45</b>

2.3 Lesbian feminism in the US 1970s-1980s .....	46
2.4 Hierarchising sex from a feminist perspective .....	52
2.5 The beginnings of anti-pornography feminism .....	55
<b>Chapter 3 Lesbian Sadomasochism in Public .....</b>	<b>62</b>
3.1 The emergence of lesbian SM as a contested notion .....	64
3.1.1 SM and the origins of the sex wars .....	64
3.1.2 Lesbian SM on the East coast .....	66
3.2 The “Barnard Conference”, 1982 .....	68
3.3 The Lesbian Sex Mafia and the “Speakout on Politically Incorrect Sex” .....	84
3.4 Feminist media coverage and post-Barnard conference sex panic .....	91
<b>Chapter 4 Feminist Discourses Critiquing SM in 1980s America .....</b>	<b>95</b>
4.1 Struggles over defining SM, defining consent .....	100
4.2 Sock it to me: patronising as anti-SM strategy .....	104
4.3 Feminist bookstores and SM .....	106
4.4 Defining good and bad lesbian sex .....	109
4.4.1 “Old-fashioned” sex and sexual temporalities .....	109
4.4.2 When SM dykes attack .....	110
4.4.3 In SM recovery/SM gone wrong .....	112
4.5 Finding a middle ground? .....	113
4.6 Struggles over (re)defining “lesbian” and “feminist” .....	114
<b>Chapter 5 Pro-Sex Voices Enter the Feminist Fray .....</b>	<b>120</b>
5.1 Lesbian sex magazines getting on their feet .....	128
5.2 Rural connections .....	135
5.3 Happy heretics? .....	136
5.4 Feminist killjoys? .....	139

<b>5.5 “Whatever gets you wet?” Feminist ethics and sadomasochism .....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>5.6 The first SM-Leather Contingent at the 1987 March on Washington.....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>Final Thoughts and Conclusions Coming to terms with power? .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>158</b>

## List of figures

Figure 1 Poster for Samois fundraising party, featuring DJ Gayle Rubin circa 1981/2. ....	1
Figure 2 Cover of second edition of <i>Coming to Power</i> (1982) and the third (1989).....	6
Figure 3 <i>Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis</i> (1982) and <i>Unleashing Feminism</i> (1993). ....	7
Figure 4 Ben Power's 1989 letter to the Lesbian Herstory Archives re. Shelix Special Collection. ....	11
Figure 5 SM dykes in London in the late 1980s. ....	24
Figure 6 Ben Power at the SMA in 2014 (Brown 2014). ....	21
Figure 7 Lesbian SM Barbie at the Mazer Lesbian Archive. ....	23
Figure 8 Books and typewriter, Ellen Willis' apartment on Waverly Street, 1980s ....	25
Figure 9 "LESBIAN = woman identified woman = dyke = lavender menace = human being = woman loving woman = me" ....	48
Figure 10 "The Sex Hierarchy: The Charmed Circle vs. the Outer Limits" ....	53
Figure 11 "The Sex Hierarchy: The Struggle over Where to Draw the Line". ....	54
Figure 12 Anti-pornography feminists demonstrating ....	55
Figure 13 Kathleen Barry and companion picketing the Ultra Room. ....	57
Figure 14 "Lesbians Against Pornography", 1979 ....	60
Figure 15 A denim vest with Samois' logo ....	62
Figure 16 Forum on feminism and sadomasochism sponsored by Women On the Sexual Fringe ....	66
Figure 17 The contents page of Heresies' <i>Sex Issue</i> (1981) ....	68
Figure 18 Some images from the 1982 Barnard conference diary ....	70
Figure 19 Gathering at LHA the weekend before the Barnard Conference ....	71
Figure 20 Minutes of the January 12, 1982 Confernce Planning meeting.....	72

Figure 21 A page from the Diary of a Conference on Sexuality (1982).....	74
Figure 22 WAP's infamous leaflet distributed at Barnard in 1982 .....	76
Figure 23 The second page of WAP's leaflet.....	77
Figure 24 WAP protester outside Barnard.....	78
Figure 25 WAP ambushing Barnard's gates on both sides.....	79
Figure 26 Wearing one's convictions on one's back ("Against SM" t-shirt). .....	79
Figure 27 Conference Diary page for Gayle Rubin's talk "Thinking Sex" .....	83
Figure 28 The "Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality" panel at Barnard .....	86
Figure 29 Allison's notes in the early stages of the conference workshop .....	87
Figure 30 Gayle Rubin Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, and Jewelle Gomez at the LSM speakout .....	89
Figure 31 "S/M: Is It Oppression?" .....	100
Figure 32 Amy Hoffman's "Anti-fantasies" editorial, <i>Bad Attitude</i> .....	120
Figure 33 Honey Lee Cottrell photographed by Tee Corinne .....	125
Figure 34 "Dagger data sheet" .....	126
Figure 35 <i>On Our Backs</i> poster for the first issue .....	128
Figure 36 Advertisements in <i>Bad Attitude</i> , 1984.....	131
Figure 37 Handkerchief advertisement from <i>On Our Backs</i> , 1984 .....	136
Figure 38 A poster for Shelix event "Fire and Power", May 7, 1989.....	138
Figure 39 Gladys Fewkes Knightly (1984) in <i>On Our Backs</i> .....	141
Figure 40 Eroticised Leatherdykes on postcards from <i>On Our Backs</i> .....	145
Figure 41 Review of <i>Coming to Power</i> , in <i>The Body Politic</i> , May 1982.....	147
Figure 42 Dorothy Allison's SM file at the Rubenstein, Duke University .....	151
Figure 43 "Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain" .....	153



Figure 44 Califia letter to Allison: "Congrats on going public with what those bitches did to

Amber! ..... 155

## **List of abbreviations**

### *Archives*

LHA - Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York

SMA - Sexual Minorities Archives, Northampton, Massachusetts

### *Groups*

LASM - Lesbians Against Sadomasochism (London, UK)

NOW – National Organisation for Women (USA)

WAP - Women Against Pornography (New York, NY)

WAVAW - Women Against Violence Against Women (Los Angeles, CA)

WAVPM - Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (San Francisco, CA)

WOSF - Women on the Sexual Fringe (LA)

### *Publications*

GCN - *Gay Community News*

*oob - off our backs*

*OOB - On Our Backs*

### *Buildings*

LLGC - London Gay and Lesbian Center (UK)

## Introducing Lesbian Sadomasochism

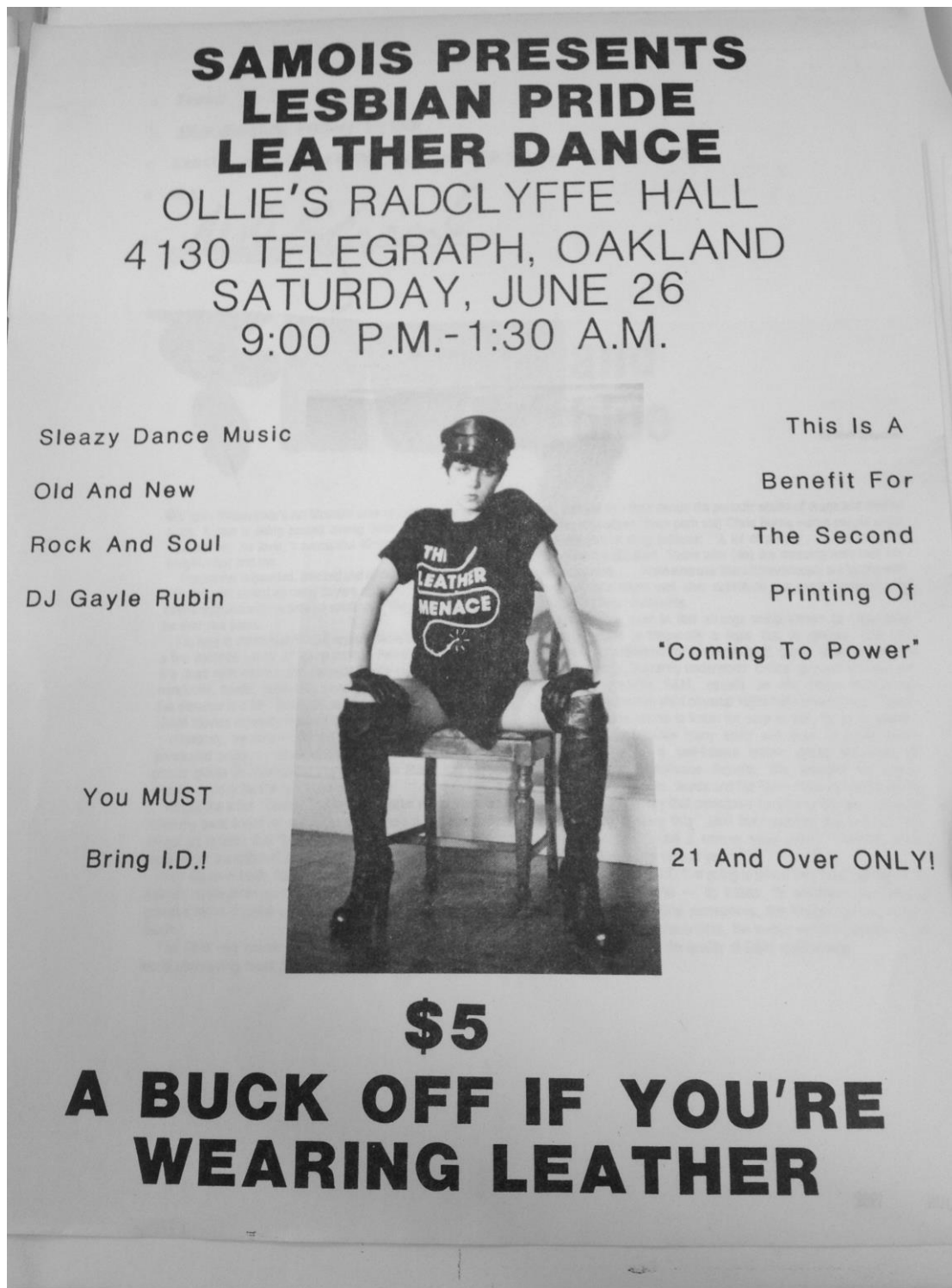


Figure 1 Poster advertising a benefit party in Oakland to raise money for the second printing of pro-lesbian SM anthology published by lesbian SM support group Samois (of which Rubin was a founding member), *Coming to Power* (Samois 1981). Featuring DJ Gayle Rubin (Circa 1981/2, Sadomasochism file, ONE).

In late 2014, I sat in a classroom at Central European University in Budapest reading Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", first published in an anthology called *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance 1984). I had no clue that this collection came out of perhaps one of the most intense, most controversial moments in feminist academia, where feminist sexuality was centre stage and politically incorrect lesbian sadomasochism (SM) caused a unprecedented commotion: the 1982 Scholar and the Feminist conference at Barnard College in New York City described in such terms as a "riot fest of debate and confrontation" (Lisa Duggan in Haimowitz, 2005) and "traumatizing" (Rubin 2011a, p.16). Nor did I have any idea that in Oakland, California circa 1981, Rubin, now an esteemed anthropologist, had a past not as a doctor, but as a DJ offering "sleazy dance music, old and new, rock and soul" to raise money for her lesbian sadomasochistic support group's publication *Coming to Power* (1980) (see Figure 1).

This unexpected turn is precisely why I am interested the largely under-examined and polarising history of lesbian sadomasochism within the lesbian feminist movement in the US. I focus particularly on lesbian SM because the majority of debates are geared towards it and, as I demonstrate, because "the notion of a 'lesbian sadomasochist' crystallised into a debated identity during the sex wars in a way that 'heterosexual sadomasochist' did not" (Khan 2008, pp.70–1). I suggest that over the course of the decade, "lesbian sadomasochist" and "pro-sex feminist" emerged as both political and sexual identities. We see that not only is the personal political, even as pro-sex feminists disassociated themselves with the second wave, but pleasure, pain and passion too are highly political as well.

Entwined in this web of controversy, I assert, is the story of a perceived fundamental split in the feminist movement between those who believed SM was patriarchal, abusive and

violent, and those who saw it as a consensual expression of sexual freedom and liberation.<sup>1</sup> These two camps were and are known by many different names: pro-sex / pro-SM / anti-anti-pornography / sex radical / libertarian / anti-prude and anti-pornography / anti-violence / radical feminist / anti-sex.<sup>2</sup> Each was convinced that the other was trying to destroy the women's movement, constituting a "moral panics/sex panic" (Irvine 2008; Herdt 2009). Ironically, the virulent antagonism against the nascent lesbian SM communities helped to strengthen them, although not always without personal hardship. Yet, in describing these two "sides", I am very conscious of wanting to avoid what Rubin has termed the "myth of the missing middle", in which we look back from the present and deem both sides extreme, and both incorrect in their extremeness (Rubin 2013).<sup>3</sup> This thesis uses original archival research to chart the trials and tribulations of lesbian feminists and lesbian sadomasochists of different stripes in 1970s and '80s America as they grappled with notions of identity, desire, consent and how exactly to best embody the classic feminist statement that the personal is political. I show that new, related identities of "lesbian sadomasochist" and "pro-sex feminist" emerged during the "sex wars" partly through reactions to attacks on SM. Feminists were torn on the best way to nurture the movement, fight patriarchy and determine what makes a "good" feminist, a "good" lesbian, and a "good" society, in and out of the bedroom.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am working with a broad definition of SM that comes

---

<sup>1</sup> Participants at the time in the debate viewed the split as absolute or real, regardless of whether or not that perception reflects the diversity of opinions. Even in 1984, feminists were aware of the falsity of a binary split between groups (see Ferguson et al., 1984). My thesis works to destabilise these binaries.

<sup>2</sup> I am conscious here, brought to my attention by Kayla Ginsburg's thesis, that the way the sex wars are written about and the terms we choose to use, even now, are inflected with the heated debates of this period. Many of those writing about the sex wars in recent years have been either part of them (with a clear "side"), like Lisa Duggan, or began studying sexuality as a discipline in their aftermath (Ginsburg 2013b, pp.13–4).

<sup>3</sup> Rubin uses this term in her critique of *The Feminist Porn Book*, where she is particularly furious that many of the "reasonable" points and limits are in fact first made by the pro-sex feminists and yet have, in the pop culture sense, become advocates for absolutely any kind of sexual behaviour. "It was *Pleasure AND Danger*, not 'All Pleasure All the Time'", she writes (2013).

directly from the main players of the period.<sup>4</sup> The term SM covers a plethora of practices from bondage to humiliation to age play to master/slave dynamics to flagellation to leather fetishism. The title page of *Coming to Power* defines SM as “a form of eroticism based on a consensual exchange of power” (Samois 1981, front cover). Robin Ruth Linden, writing in the introduction of *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (1982), has a slightly more detailed definition:

There is a general belief that sadomasochism is a sexual form involving two or more partners of either gender, in which physical pain and/or psychological/emotional humiliation is inflicted on the masochist (also called slave, bottom, M, submissive) by the sadist (also called master, top, mistress, dominant, dominatrix) (Linden 1982, p.2).

For Patrick (formerly Pat) Califia, writer and member of Samois, a “bottom” is “someone who temporarily cedes control, within consensual and negotiated limits, to their top” (1993, p.133).<sup>5</sup> A top is “someone who temporarily takes control, within consensual and negotiated limits, from his or her bottom. Responsible tops are people who have eroticised taking responsibility for the bottom’s emotional and physical state and well-being during the scene” (ibid., p.152).<sup>6</sup> Comparing these three definitions we see that Samois and Califia emphasise the consensual “exchange” of power, as well as its temporary nature, while Linden suggests that pain and/or humiliation is “inflicted” on the bottom by the top. By beginning her

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<sup>4</sup> Space constraints mean that thesis is not a detailed description of SM practices or play parties; I offer three definitions here to introduce the concept. As I mention in my conclusion, a historical study of this nature is also much needed, also to complexify our understandings of the different identifications within SM (such as whether or not being a top or a bottom impacts one’s politics on feminist SM, which I hypothesize it would). In the way that the debates were taken up, the realities of SM sexual practice, I suggest, were obscured by a general, unspecific phantom notion of SM, or one based on the most “extreme” versions such as Nazi role play (see chapter 3 and 4). A very detailed list of practices can also be found in Califia’s *Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* (1988b).

<sup>5</sup> Califia now identifies as a man and goes by the name “Patrick”. For clarity, I use the name and gender pronouns that his publications were published under at the time, so pre-transition works I use “Pat” and she/her pronouns, and post-transition “Patrick” and he/his pronouns.

<sup>6</sup> Newton and Walton also noted in their candid contribution to *Pleasure and Danger* (1984) that the terms “bottom” and “top” can be used outside of SM, although they are not entirely unrelated to the notions of dominant and submissive, the power differential itself is not eroticised. They also make the point that these identities can be related to butch and femme, but stress that neither top nor bottom has an innate gender (1989, p.246).



definition with “there is a general belief”, Linden invokes the power of common knowledge to support what at first glance could appear a neutral and factual definition, when in fact it leaves out many of the nuances of SM behaviour. For example, power play does not have to involve pain or humiliation according to Samois (although it often does), and as the contents of *Coming to Power* make clear, sadists and masochists work *together* to plan a scene – any infliction of anything is done consensually.<sup>7</sup> Already it is clear from Linden’s definition that she sees no possibility for patriarchal-free SM. By contrast, Samois’ focuses the “eroticism” and pleasures generated by SM. Yet in essence, the broad definition of SM as potentially involving pain, humiliation, and tops and bottoms is one of the few things both pro and anti-SM feminists agree on – even if their definitions of consent have not aligned, as I will explore later.

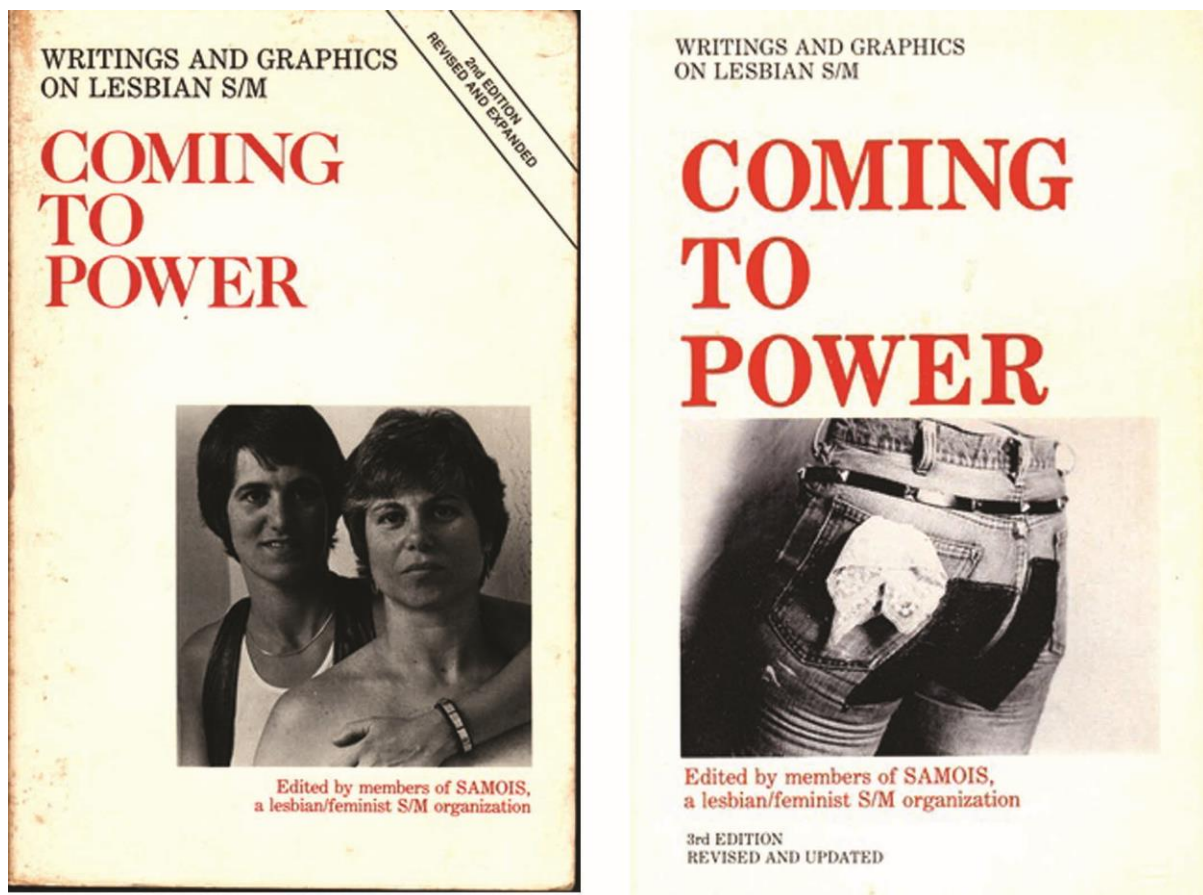
In today’s vocabulary, “BDSM” as a term to describe such practices has more currency – by practitioners and those writing about it – but for others, S&M remains common, at least in the US (Weiss 2006, p.103). Typically the term “BDSM” has been labelled a recent phenomena (Weiss 2011), but actually already in 1984 *The Lesbian News* carried an announcement from Los Angeles Lesbian SM group Leather and Lace renaming SM “BDSM”, standing for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism) (News 1984, p.10). This did not seem to catch on right away. In most texts within my time frame, one sees variations on s/m, S/M, sm, SM, s&m, S&M, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Of course, I do not wish to claim – and neither to so-called pro-SM writers – that all lesbian SM is free from sexual coercion and violence. Like in all sexual encounters, there is risk of abusive people - SM does not exist outside of wider culture. However, feminist SM is that which coheres with feminist principles of respect and informed consent, as Califia emphasises in his definitions above (1993).

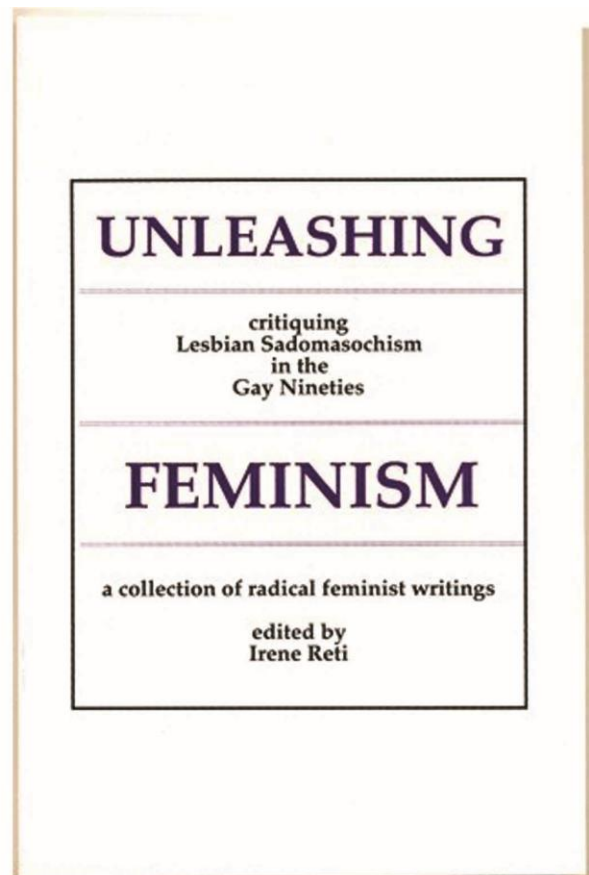
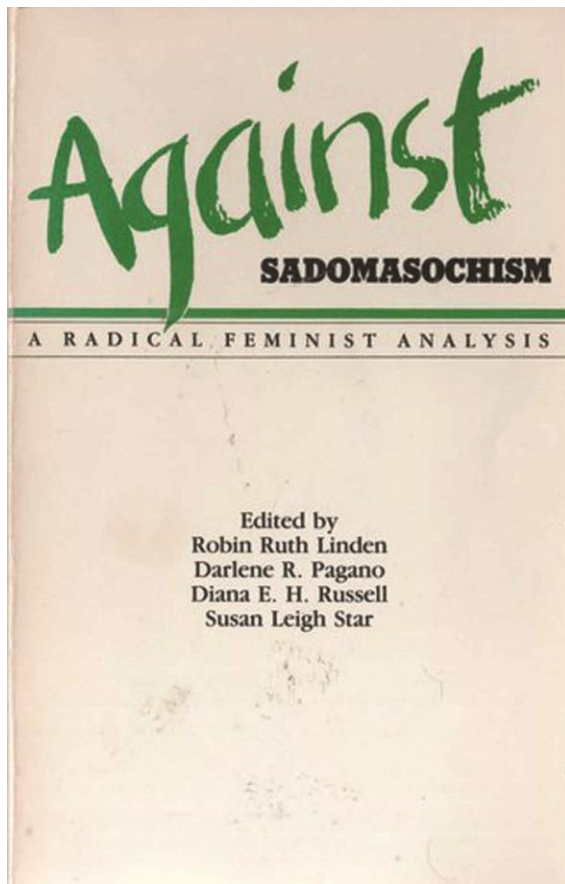
sadomasochism most commonly.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, I use SM throughout, for consistency and historical accuracy.

While it is important to establish what I mean when I say SM, this thesis is not concerned so much with a psychological account of why people are interested in SM, or with trying to explain it or describe it in depth. Rather, I am looking at the ways in which the identity of lesbian sadomasochist has emerged, and public *reactions to* and *defences of* SM.



**Figure 2** Gayle Rubin's DJing skills were obviously enough of a hit that a year after its original publication, a second edition of *Coming to Power* was released (with the same cover design) in 1982. It was important to have the faces of real lesbians showing pride in their desires, looking straight at the camera. The third edition (1989) shows the hanky code instead, referencing their first publication (1979).

<sup>8</sup> "Kink" is also used euphemistically these days, though I have not seen it used in this way in this thesis' time period. "Leather", too, is a term that holds complex meaning. Warner calls it a euphemism that came into usage after "SM" and sometimes uses them interchangeably, although I will not do that here (2011, p.2). According to Carmelle Creane, a photographer working on a historical picture series of important leatherwomen, there is a difference between SM Dyke Culture and Leather Culture. "Leather" also can refer to a ritualised SM culture with badges, trainings, families, official mentors and milestones (Creane, pers. comm., March 25, 2015). However, like "kink", like "leather", is not a term I have come across in this period's research and so I do not address it in depth.



**Figure 3** The companion text of sorts to *Coming of Power*; the straightforwardly named *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (1982), and a later, similar book, *Unleashing Feminism* (1993).

This thesis covers, broadly, the period of 1975 (Ruth 1975), when the first article about lesbian SM was published in the feminist press, to 1993, when the second (and final) feminist volume of essays against lesbian SM was published (Reti 1993, see Figure 3). Lesbian SM surely existed before 1975.<sup>9</sup> However, it focuses largely on the period 1981-1987. My thesis begins in earnest with the publication of Samois's *Coming to Power* (1981, see Figure 2), a pro-SM anthology. This was followed the very next year by the controversial, 1982 Barnard Conference, the publication of *Against Sadomasochism* (see Figure 3) and the beginning of the so-called feminist Sex Wars. My thesis ends in the late 1980s with the first SM-Leather contingent at the Second National March on Washington for

<sup>9</sup> Califia even recalls a story of a couple who cruised in gay men's leather bars in the early 1960s looking for partners – but organised groups and published work did not (Samois 1981, p.245).

Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1987, the cooling down (but not end) of anti-pornography activists and the surfacing of new kinds of feminist debates starting to overshadow SM.<sup>10</sup> Even by 1992, as legal scholar Ummni Khan's personal recollection suggests, the issue of lesbian SM was not as prominent (at least in Canada). She recalls, "although I began my undergraduate studies towards the end of the sex wars, I was completely unaware at the time of any 'war' between feminists on the issues of pornography or sadomasochism (s/m)" (2014, p.1). By contrast, from historian Shane Phelan's perspective on America in the 1980s, "every journal, every newspaper, every local lesbian feminist group has been the site of furious argument and polarization" (1989, p.101). So it is this intense period I zoom in on in this study.<sup>11</sup>

My focus is the United States (US), although the sex wars were raging in the United Kingdom too, and even had resonances in Europe and some English-speaking countries as far away as New Zealand.<sup>12</sup> There is a small but robust body of literature that deals with the UK, and some of their analyses can be applied to the US context (Healey 1996; Ardill & O'Sullivan 1986; Bush 2014; Green 1997). Khan notes that there is less literature concerning

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<sup>10</sup> I hope to explore the factors that lead to the de-nuclearisation of the issue in the mid- to late 1990s in a future study. Khan suggests that this occurred because of the noxious influence of the ever growing power of the New Right and the shocks over the Meese Report (1986) and the National Endowment for the Arts censorship of Robert Mapplethorpe (1989) (Khan 2008, pp.83–4). Even so, Khan emphasises that while in academic and feminist circles critiques of essentialism and the rise of poststructuralism and queer theory tend to see SM as a positive transgression, the law remains linking violence and SM (Khan 2008, p.170).

<sup>11</sup> The issue of sex work in today's feminist movement seems to occupy a similar place to that of SM in the 1980s. For a consideration of some of these debates from a journalist and former sex worker's perspective, see Melissa Gira Grant's excellent monograph *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (2014). Nevertheless, academic writing on SM still portrays SM and feminism as incompatible, a belief that by Meg Barker and Ani Ritchie refute in their "Feminist SM: A contradiction in terms or a way of challenging traditional gendered dynamics through sexual practice?" (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Sydney, Australia had its own lesbian SM groups and communities, G.O.D. and Wicked Women (Jennings 2009; O'Sullivan 1997; Leather 2014). *Coming to Power* lists lesbian SM groups in Germany, the UK and Australia. They also note that responses to their first publication, a small, 45-page booklet entitled *What Color is Your Handkerchief?* (Samois 1979, see figure 6), came also from Polish, German, and British readers. A Māori woman (presumably from New Zealand) asked them for contacts of other lesbians of colour (Davis 1981, p.9). Samois also acknowledges the information gained from the conversation group "Women and S/M", organised by Dutch group Vereniging Studiegroep Sado-masochisme (V.S.S.M.). Furthermore, Sheila Jeffries describes the women's festival in Amsterdam in 1981 as having public displays of lesbian SM (Jeffreys 1993, p.171). Both Dorothy Allison (a writer who founded NYC's SM group Lesbian Sex Mafia) and Shelix (based in Northampton, Massachusetts) have info sheets in their archives about V.S.S.M., suggesting that they had contact with groups other than Samois (Allison Papers, Box 21; Shelix File, LHA).

SM in Canada, probably because Canadian battles were mostly fought around the issue of pornography and censorship rather than SM specifically (2008, p.29). It is evident that international communities were forming. However, this thesis stays within the American context.

## Methods and materials

Although, as Phelan asserts, “Every journal, every newspaper, every local lesbian feminist group” was up in arms about SM (1989, p.101), whether for or against it, I have not managed to read every journal nor every newspaper. Nevertheless, I have been able to utilise a range of archival materials, largely sourced from a research trip to the US in March 2015 when I visited the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina (Rubenstein), the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries (ONE) Los Angeles, the June Mazer Lesbian Archives of Los Angeles and Southern California (Mazer), and the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York (LHA).<sup>13</sup> These archives span diverse time periods and hold collections from various geographical locations around America. The Rubenstein, a large and prestigious library, holds sex radical writer and Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM, 1983-) founder Dorothy Allison’s papers recording her interest in SM, her involvement with LSM, her intellectual and affective connections with other SM writers and activists, and her involvement in the 1982 Barnard conference, a collection I rely on extensively. At ONE, the

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<sup>13</sup> The Rubenstein is a university archive is housed at Duke, an elite private university in North Carolina. It holds a huge and impressive range of materials and has specialized research centers including the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture. The Rubenstein has a staff of highly trained professional archivists and librarians, and researchers are required to request their materials in advance online and register as a user (including ID photo). Allison was born and raised in North Carolina which explains partly why she donated her papers there. ONE is part of the University of Southern California libraries and describes itself as largest repository of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) materials in the world. In contrast to these two professional archives. both the Mazer (originally called the West Coast Lesbian Collections) and the LHA are nonprofits and are run entirely by volunteers, and are dedicated solely to lesbian history. The LHA is housed in a Brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn, with the guardians of the archive living on the top floor. The Mazer has a similar homey and informal attitude.

Mazer, and the LHA, I have been able to access files on SM, as well as some on anti-pornography groups. I also have found a huge number of lesbian periodicals whose letters to the editor I paid particular attention. The LHA also holds the newsletters of Shelix (Shelix Special Collection), a Northampton-based LGBT archive, open only to pro-SM researchers (see Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In opening these files, I suppose I self-identified as a “pro-SM reader”. Strangely enough, when I asked Ben Power about this note at the LHA, he did not remember such a thing and seemed confused by my question, thinking I was referring to the Sexual Minorities Archive (SMA) he runs in Northampton. He told me that the SMA is completely open to the public, and there are “no barriers to access and there is no censoring of materials we collect relevant to LGBTQI and BDSM lives and experiences” (Power, pers. comm., May 14, 2015).



# SHELIX. ♀ TO ♀ S/M SUPPORT

Dear Deb -

March '89 issue of SHELIX newsletter enclosed, for file.

"Special collection" sounds OK. We want these to be protected but also accessible. As long as S/M women & men can find them, special collection is fine. Thanks for marking the box "For Pro-S/M Readers Only."

Back issues will follow shortly w/group info., etc.

Happy Spring!

Bet Power

POB 416 FLORENCE STATION  
NORTHAMPTON, MA 0106

Figure 4 Bet (now Ben) Power's 1989 letter to Deb Edel, one of the founders (with Joan Nestle) of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. Power requests that the Shelix newsletters be marked "for pro-S/M readers only" so they are "protected" but also "accessible". This, perhaps, reflects the hostile environment of the late 1980s and fears of who might access these newsletters and for what purpose. We also see a desire for knowledge sharing amongst SM people "as long as S/M women & men can find them", Power specifies (1989, Shelix Special Collection, LHA).

I have also engaged with other primary materials specifically dealing with the issue published at the time. I pay particular attention to books such as *Coming to Power*, *The Powers of Desire, Pleasure and Danger*, and *Against Sadomasochism* (Samois 1981; Snitow et al. 1983; Vance 1984; Linden et al. 1982), as well as secondary sources examining the feminist movement, sex wars and sadomasochism, as I will detail in my literature review below.

In addition, I did some brief interviews with key figures.<sup>15</sup> First, I did email interviews with both Amy Hoffman and Cindy Patton, the women who founded lesbian pro-sex magazine *Bad Attitude* in 1984<sup>16</sup> I also had email correspondence with Ben (formerly Bet) Power, founder and director of the Sexual Minorities Archive and founder of Shelix.

Throughout the research for and writing of this thesis, I have quite literally laughed, cried and gasped in horror, disbelief, amusement, pity, shame, empathy and, sometimes, confusion. The histories of lesbian sadomasochism are, without a doubt, visceral histories. Feminist people, places and events have been physically and emotionally attacked, picketed, censored and mocked by fellow feminists for being the “wrong” kind of feminist and the “wrong” kind of lesbian. Pro-SM discourse has been discredited as everything from patriarchal to unenlightened, to fascist and racist, and the anti-SM lesbians have been accused of being prudish, uptight and more interested in a cup of tea than sex (Knightly 1984, p.24).

Indeed, anyone who doubts that feminists have a sense of humour can put their doubts aside after reading some of the sarcastic, witty, bitter and caustic humour bandied about in the pages of lesbian sex magazines that appeared in the 1980s like *Bad Attitude* (1984-1990) and *On Our Backs* (1984-2006), as well as in more mainstream lesbian/feminist publications

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<sup>15</sup> I only spoke with key figures of the “pro-sex” movement which has no doubt shaped my own perspective; this would be expanded and diversified in a larger study.

<sup>16</sup> I also had some email correspondence with Carmelle Creane, a photographer doing a project on leatherwomen’s history, which although short, helped me understand leather culture better. Unfortunately, an in-depth oral history project was outside the scope of this thesis and something I hope to explore in the future.

like *off our backs* (1970-2008), *Lesbian Connection* (1974-), *Hera* (1975-83) and *Lesbian Tide* (1971-1980).<sup>17</sup> Aside from writing furiously, lesbians have organised their own SM support groups (such as Shelix in Northampton, MA, and Urania in Boston,), publications, and parties (including DJs). This history too, can be found in the archives if only one cares to look, but few scholars have.

## Aims

This thesis tries to do justice to the stories and struggles of SM dykes in America between approximately 1975 and 1993, with the passion, the humour and the haphazard energy with which these battles were fought, although I do try to avoid the vicious sarcasm.<sup>18</sup> While it is a story filled with a good amount of woe and conflict, I do not wish to obscure the fun, play and sex that was a significant part of the reason SM lesbians organised groups and were out and public about their desires, standing proudly outside the White House in their leather as part of the 1987 Leather Contingent at the March on Washington. Indeed, even a skim reading of Foucault tells us that one cannot separate politics, power, confession and sex, as I explore below in my theoretical framework (Hartsock 1987; Foucault 1980b). Samois at least seemed to recognise this: the feedback they received after their first booklet was that “lesbians do want more information about S/M, from political analysis to fantasy material” (Davis 1981, p.9). Their *Coming to Power* mixes erotic stories, how-to guides and political

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<sup>17</sup> *Bad Attitude* and *On Our Backs* explored in depth in chapter 5. *off our backs* was a nationally distributed feminist newspaper. *Lesbian Connection* is and was monthly lesbian feminist magazine. *Hera* was a small Philadelphia-based feminist publication which was published between 1975-1983. *The Lesbian Tide* was a bimonthly feminist lesbian publication which was published in Los Angeles, originally as the newsletter of the homophile organisation Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) but split into its own entity in 1972.

<sup>18</sup> Using Judith Butler’s notion of what it makes to “do justice to someone” (formulated with regard to transsexual and intersex subjects, and drawing heavily on Foucault’s “politics of truth”), I feel my task as a historian is to somehow, “be careful” in how I approach the fragments of this past, a question I further explore in my limitations section when I discuss archives (2001, p.630). “What might it mean to do justice to someone under these circumstances? Can we?” Butler asks (Ibid.) Even when we have words directly from the people involved, the way scholars and researchers use direct speech “takes place in a language that is already going on, that is already saturated with norms, that predisposes us as we seek to speak of ourselves” (Ibid.). To grapple with this question, I refer to Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” in my theoretical section (Haraway 1988).

treatises with no discernable order. Califia describes his first article on lesbian SM, “A Secret Side to Lesbian Sexuality” (published in *The Advocate* in 1979), as “simultaneously pornographic, political, and educational”, which could be an accurate description of many SM texts, caught in the middle of trying to stand up against criticism and educate, while still representing forbidden desires (Califia 1994, p.11). This thesis takes all these materials as valid objects of study, but places them in a, hopefully, discernable order.

In doing so, I pursue my key research questions: In what ways were discourses around lesbian SM mobilised and conceived of during the 1980s (in Foucault’s terms, “put into discourse”) (Foucault 1980b, p.11)? How did these discourses contribute to defining lesbian feminism and lesbian sadomasochistic and feminist pro-sex identities during this time? While not even close to an exhaustive narrative, this thesis works to tell these stories that are, for the most part, lying dormant in archives and unspoken in our lesbian elders’ memory banks.<sup>19</sup> Telling this history is crucial for a fuller understanding of lesbian and feminist history and, as such, deserves further exploration than the sparse treatment it has received.

In writing this history, I explore the place of sexual pleasure in public and in private within feminist politics. I posit that strident notions of “good” and “bad” sex have been delineated by feminists through various anti-SM discursive strategies, leaving those who did not conform on the sexual (and social) fringe. This thesis traces strategies of (counter-hegemonic) community building and defining “lesbian”, but also explores the ways in which “lesbian sadomasochist” emerged as a contested identity. This thesis, therefore, significantly contributes to knowledge not just about lesbianism, sadomasochism and feminism, but how in the past all three have made sometimes rather uneasy bedfellows.

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<sup>19</sup> I discuss some of the possible reasons for this in the beginning of my literature review, as well as below in my limitations.

## Structure

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In chapter 1, my literature review, I place myself in dialogue with the existing contemporary and historical discourses around the 1970s American feminist movement and the so-called lesbian/feminist sex wars in 1980s USA. In addition, I examine the ways in which sadomasochism has been theorised and pathologised since the late 19th century, and how these earlier treatments impacted debates in the 1980s. In dealing with both these bodies of literature, I analyse not only what *is* present, but also the gaps and silences. I also briefly outline my theoretical background and my methodology. Foucault and historians of sexuality in his wake take a starring role, as do queer and feminist historical approaches. I describe my sources, a mix of primary and secondary sources, many of which I discovered on my research trip to several archives in the US in March 2015.

Chapter 2 is a detailed historical account – based on my own primary research and a critical engagement with secondary literature – of the political, social, legal and cultural conditions that have made the brouhaha around lesbian sadomasochism possible. The mix of lesbophobia in the feminist movement, the developmental trajectory of lesbian feminism, the anti-pornography movement are all discussed.

In chapter 3 I explore the beginnings of SM in the public imaginary, starting with a very brief history of lesbian SM on the West coast of the US, then turning to the now infamous 1982 “Scholar and the Feminist” conference at Barnard. I focus on the ensuing controversy – in Janice Irvine’s terms, a “moral/sex panic” – caused by its head-on embrace of complexities of female sexuality (Irvine 2008). Tainted by (false) accusations of the conference’s SM-heavy programmes, anti-pornography feminists protested outside Barnard’s gates, and began the sex wars in earnest.

Close reading and analysis of a range of primary sources form the centre of chapters 4 and 5. The wealth of information found in archival materials simply cannot be found

elsewhere, and is crucial for finding all kinds of voices on lesbian SM. These chapters are very loosely and perhaps too simplistically divided into “pro” and “anti” SM camps, with chapter four dealing with the former and chapter five the latter although themes and arguments criss-cross between the two.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter 4 thus focuses especially on letters to the editor and opinion pieces regarding SM in various lesbian/feminist publications. Looking closely at the letters to the editor page reveals battles not just around the contentious issue of SM but also varied clashes over what it means to be a proper lesbian or feminist, expressed through notions of “good”, “bad” and “old-fashioned” sex.

Chapter 5 looks at the issue from another angle – that of pro-SM voices. It chronicles the contribution of some of these publications to pro-sex discourse. I also examine strategies (such as humour) that SM groups deployed to defend themselves as they explored the pleasures and dangers of outlaw sexuality.

Finally, I offer some concluding thoughts, positing that by the end of the decade, lesbian sadomasochism had not only survived the sex panic, but had solidified an identity of sorts known as the lesbian sadomasochist and her close companion, the pro-sex feminist. I find lesbian SM during the sex wars a generative place from which to explore questions about the relationship of the personal to the political. I suggest that the legacy of lesbian SM helps understand feminism’s complex relationship to sexuality and sexual politics. I also expand on the limitations I list below, and make some suggestions for further research to continue the feminist attempt to make sense of lesbian SM, and to come to terms with power.

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<sup>20</sup> This is a strategic decision to attempt to isolate the differences in strategies of the different actors on “both”, or should I say “all”, sides of the debate, whether they identified as an insider or outside of the lesbian SM subculture. Thus, another way of phrasing this could be a split between insider and outsider, which roughly corresponds to pro- and anti-SM views.



## Limitations

This study is inevitably constrained by certain limitations, both practical and theoretical. In a project of this size and with a limited amount of time to complete it, I was unable to visit all the archives I would have liked to, and to include all the geographical regions that felt the impact of the sex wars or had their own lesbian SM communities. Furthermore, I finished my study right before two important books regarding lesbian SM are published, the sequels of sorts to *Coming to Power* and *Against Sadomasochism: The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader* (Califia & Sweenet 1996), and *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties* (Reti 1993).

Lesbians of colour are sorely missing from this thesis, and indeed from the majority of writing about the sex wars and lesbian SM. While there is more writing by and about women of colour involved in the BDSM scene (as it was called by then) in the mid-1990s to the present,<sup>21</sup> I could not find much information within my time period.<sup>22</sup> “No evidence” has often been used as an excuse to ignore queer history when, in fact, historian Kathleen Canning has posited that fragments, silences and disjunctures are a fundamental aspect of marginalised history (2006, p.109). Basu at least begins to address the point that, “as a historical practice, sadomasochism cannot be adequately theorized without a consideration of race... it is inadequate to theorize sadomasochism without examining its relation to the histories of slavery and colonisation”, and this remains true whether one is an advocate for

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<sup>21</sup> For example, there is some information of about people of colour meeting at the SM-leather contingent in March on Washington in 1993, the Living in Leather conference in Chicago (1993) and the foundation of *Black Leather in Color* as a result, a publication for people of colour involved in leather and SM (VanLammeren 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Whether this is failure in my own research skills or reflects the different ways radicalised subjects and women of colour, already demonised by various discourses hypersexualising them, have engaged with mainstream and public debates about sexuality and sadomasochism, I am unsure.

SM or not (Basu 2012, p.1).<sup>23</sup> In this case, my project is not adequately theorised, for my project was based on the material which has thus far been archived. Indeed, the SM writings from the 1970s and 1980s that I encountered are, for the most part, more concerned with patriarchy than white supremacy. It is only white privilege that can disconnect practices such as whipping, branding and sexual humiliation from their past in the American context. What is certain is that the topic deserves more research, and with more time and more creative research practise.

Also missing is the impact of HIV/AIDS on American LGBT people and sadomasochists during the 1980s and early 1990s. While some SM lesbians were committed to women-only spaces and rejected male influence, the affective bonds and practical connections (shared spaces, sharing resources) between the SM lesbians and SM gay men community were strong. Many “pro-sex” feminists were involved in AIDS activism.<sup>24</sup> The 1987 and 1993 Gay and Lesbian Marches on Washington were significant for their leather contingents, but they also had AIDS at the forefront, and the two cannot be separated. Furthermore, safety – both in regards to physical harm and sexually transmitted diseases – was always a high priority for the lesbian sadomasochist community.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Race is glaringly absent in much of contemporary writing about SM (Beckmann 2009; Newmahr 2011; Warner 2011) but is deftly explored by others (Bauer 2008; Bauer 2014; Weiss 2011). Robin Bauer’s “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of the Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities” is a fascinating exploration of how different race and class privileges can impact practitioners’ feelings about dynamics that are race or class-impacted, such as Master/Slave (Bauer 2008, pp.234–5). It is clear from Vi Johnson, a prominent black lesbian SM community member who maintains her own private archive, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker’s contribution to *Against Sadomasochism*, and many others factors that women of colour were present in the movement. But where are they in the literature? I am loath to contribute to this silencing process, and yet, I have not been able to find much information to add to this discussion. However, I do believe that in the context of a larger (and less historically restorative) project, especially one dedicated more to the ethical implications of SM, the issue could be better addressed.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Amber Hollibaugh was the founding director of the Lesbian AIDS project at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (Hollibaugh 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Certainly SM dykes produced their own safety manuals (Califia 1988b) organized safety workshops (Shelix file, LHA), and were hyper aware of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, with *Bad Attitude* and *On Our Backs* publishing information about the topic before many other publications (Donnelly 1986; Firestone 1987).

The issue of transgender men and women in the movement, too, remains under-researched and notably absent in my thesis. Many of the same accusations thrown at SM dykes were also used against trans dykes, such as their complicity with patriarchy. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the question of inclusion in women's music festivals, an issue that arose particularly in the early 1990s, falling just outside the period included in my thesis.<sup>26</sup>

Some archives remain in the hands of personal collectors and are only just beginning to be donated to official archives. It is perhaps only now that enough temporal distance exists such that women are beginning to realise the importance of their records and feel the political climate is appreciative of the knowledge they hold, although many of the names in archives remain blacked out or restricted.<sup>27</sup> As recently as 2014 the Schlesinger acquired the records of Urania and *Outrageous Women* magazine and the *On Our Backs* and Susie Bright records were acquired by Cornell, and the Leather Museum and Archives Women's Leather History Project (WLHP) launched in 2010, the same year that Dorothy Allison's papers were donated to Duke University. I am aware too of a documentary project in the UK that is collecting materials from women active in the SM and sex-positive scene in the 1980s; once the film is done the director will donate everything she has gathered to the London Metropolitan Archives (Bush 2014) Del LaGrace Volcano is also planning to exhibit more works from this period (Bursh, pers. comm, March 14 2015; see Figure 5).<sup>28</sup> As the archives themselves grow, so too will the possibility for more and more detailed study.

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<sup>26</sup> Both SM dykes and lesbian trans women have been unwelcome in these spaces. Some SM groups, like Shelix and Lesbian Sex Mafia, welcomed trans women from the beginning, but as Dorothy Allison remembers, LSM's trans inclusive stance garnered controversy (2007, p.60). Ben Power recalls how Urania "had a hard time with me being a trans man and being a member (briefly)" (pers. comm, 14 May 2015).

<sup>27</sup> For example, some folders of the *Outrageous Women* collection cannot be accessed until 2060.

<sup>28</sup> What is particularly interesting about the photos in Volcano's photos in Figure 5 is that many these photos are taken at LGBT events – I would love to pursue further the concept of being SM in public political moments.

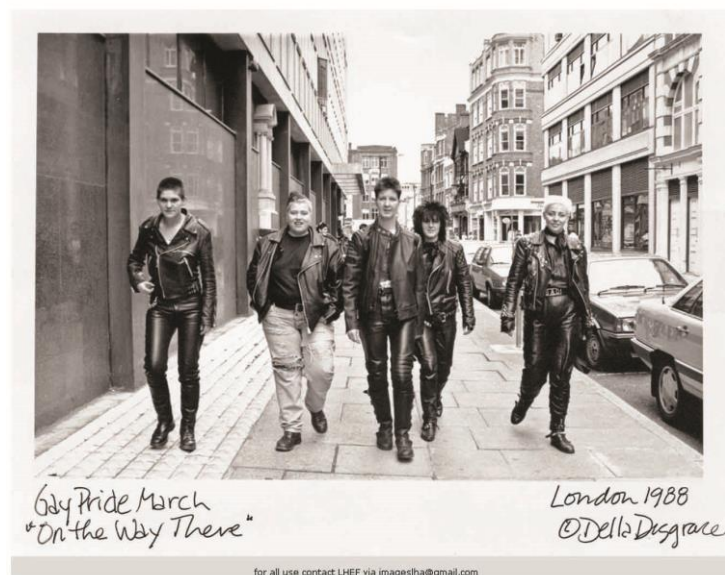


Figure 5 Some of "Della Disgrace's" (now Del LaGrace Volcano) shots of SM dykes in London in the late 1980s.



**Figure 6 Ben Power at the SMA in 2014, which is also his home, standing in front of his portrait. “That’s what I looked like and dressed like, all through the 80s and 90s,” he says. “I was into the leather scene” (Brown 2014).**

However, as Derrida punnily points out in “*Mal d’archive*” or “Archive Fever”, the archive is no neutral repository, but is (like the museum that displays archival materials), in fact, a political institution with a role in “actively shaping collective (or social) memory” at every step, from what is deemed valuable to preserve, to funding, to location and many other factors (Cook & Schwartz 2002, p.1).<sup>29</sup> In saying this, I attempt to highlight the inherent lack of neutrality of the archive in what is deemed worth saving, and who has the resources to

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<sup>29</sup> The archive has no Origins and no Truth to hand out to those historians who can find the funding to travel long distances and spend long, uncomfortable nights in hotel beds to find them. Archival material has already been sullied by many hands before it even reaches the historian. The preserving and ordering process is itself artificial and is inflected with the social mores and prejudices of the time. For a fascinating and geographically diverse anthology of different historians’ experiences in the archives, see Antionette Burton’s *Archive Stories* (2005).

maintain and donate to archives – especially when, as we see, many Ivy League and prestigious, private universities are now the guardians of these records.<sup>30</sup> Angela, an archivist at the June Mazer Lesbian Archives told me how, when the archives were still based in Oakland (some time before 1989), previous archivists had rejected Gayle Rubin’s donations because they were opposed to SM. By the time I visited, however, their SM collection was small but significant, including an SM Barbie doll that nobody knew the origin of (see Figure 7). She kept me company during my many hours in the archives, and was a tangible example of the ways that the history of sexuality is intertwined with play, intimacy, love, emotion, camp, silence – things that do not immediately emanate from the pages of traditional records.<sup>31</sup> The queer archive, then, has an affective role in compensating for the “loss of history” and institutional neglect of queer lives (Cvetkovich 2003, p.241).

Nevertheless, an archive is still an institution and can replay institutional discrimination. As I worked with Dorothy Allison’s papers, a librarian at the private university Duke in Durham, North Carolina, made a point to reassure me that the librarian who acquired this collection “got along with all types”, a statement that simply underscored how elitist the archival process is, even when it tries to be democratic (pers. comm., March 23, 2015). Class is another unnamed privilege that runs throughout my thesis. While SM can be largely about psychological play, it is also true that the magazines are full of advertisements for leather and toy boutiques, and Dorothy Allison’s papers have many an issue of catalogues full of expensive SM gear. Pleasure can come at quite a high cost.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Yale is also apparently in talks about acquiring the records of *Fag Rag*, a publication closely implicated in the founding of *Bad Attitude* (Neyfakh 2013). Another important question to ask is: What kinds of people feel comfortable accessing this kind of information at say, Harvard, Duke and Cornell, where the librarians may have no specific knowledge or sensitivity, versus at the SMA or LHA, where folks who were involved with the information they collect welcome you into their private homes?

<sup>31</sup> For excellent discussions of the queer archive, see Ann Cvetkovich *An Archive of Feeling* (2003).

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of consumerism in the modern day BDSM community, see chapter 3 of Margot Weiss’ excellent ethnography (2011).





**Figure 7 My mysterious companion the Lesbian SM Barbie at the Mazer Lesbian Archive.**

History too, has a cost. There is perhaps no better example than the Sexual Minority Archives (SMA) in Northampton, run by Ben Power, who also founded Shelix in 1983. Power writes about how, using the privilege he had from a good job, he housed the archives in his own home, as well as hosted the Shelix meetings and paid for postage of the Shelix newsletter from his own pocket (Shelix newsletter 1989, Shelix special collection, LHA). As he explained in 2014 to a journalist for the local radio station, when he became ill and

unemployed, all of these valuable resources became threatened (Brown 2014).<sup>33</sup> As Power states, “If I felt that mainstream history and historians in general were being proactive in researching and telling the story of my people, then my job would be complete,” he says. “But it’s not happening, and so my job goes on” (Brown 2014). This becomes even clearer upon an examination of the relevant literature in the following chapter.

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<sup>33</sup> Understanding that my research is perhaps contributing to silencing voices without access to resources is not enough to combat this, but I hope that if I continue this research, a comprehensive series of oral histories could begin to combat these discrepancies and silences, and develop this rich history even more.



## Chapter 1

### Literature Review



**Figure 8** Photo taken in Ellen Willis' apartment on Waverly Street in NYC, sometime in the early 1980s, displaying some of the key titles of the women's movement, the feminist sex wars and the history of sexuality all in a jumble (Nona Willis Aronowitz, Pers. Comm., May 17 2015; <http://ellenwillis.tumblr.com/>).

In this chapter, I outline the existing literature that relates to lesbian SM. I begin with sadomasochism, then explore lesbian sadomasochism's place within the histories both of the feminist and of the lesbian, before focussing on the key texts for this study. Then, I outline my theoretical framework, placing particular emphasis on Foucault's history of sexuality and the notion of a "sex panic" (from Stanley Cohen via Janice Irvine). Lastly I elaborate upon my approach to doing queer and feminist history, advocating for the value of writing this minoritarian history in contributing to thinking about feminist and lesbian identities and histories. The lack of recent published resources means I often use exactly what Ellen Willis was reading in the early 1980s (see Figure 8).

Why is there so little secondary literature on lesbian BDSM? In some ways it is just as mysterious as the origins of the Mazer's SM Barbie. But even if the archive is more silent on some issues than others, my archival work for this thesis has demonstrated that a wealth of information is there for those who look creatively. Lisa Duggan reminds us of the stigma of writing about SM, a force that, she suggests, has severely hindered Rubin's career (2011, p.147). Furthermore the sexual nature of the topic, as well as the heated nature of the debates around SM mean that even today, the subject remains highly sensitive.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, below I explain what sorts of literature existed, and how I made use of it.

### **1.1 Sadomasochism and lesbianism**

The rich and lively history of lesbian sadomasochism is notably and surprisingly absent in accounts of both sadomasochism, and lesbian histories. Criminal, medical and legal records exist, but alone tell a story of deviancy and repression, not love or sex. Even in more recent years the amount of scholarly interest in lesbian SM has nowhere near matched the volume of writing that lesbian SM generated at the time. Some feminists did address lesbian SM directly during this time, and a consideration of some of these texts forms part of my primary research (Samois 1981; Linden et al. 1982). It is not surprising that there are so few, sustained treatments of the subject and that most, especially from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, that address the topic either directly or in any sustained manner are anti-SM (such as Penelope 1987; Raymond 1986). It is also perhaps stigma that prevents the rare books which includes detailed original research on SM, such as media scholar Carolyn Bronstein's *Battling Pornography*, from mentioning SM in the blurb, table of contents, or any official information

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<sup>34</sup> Anxieties were seen on a long and emotional series of posts on the Facebook group for the film which will be made about the "London's Rebel Dykes of the '80s". People were worried about who would see footage of the live sex shows and other scenes from the lesbian SM club Chain Reactions.

about the book (Bronstein 2011a; Press n.d.).<sup>35</sup> Lynda Hart, Karmen McKendrick and Claudia Card each address specifically lesbian SM, but from a highly philosophical perspective. Many psychological texts exclude either women or lesbians: John Noyes does not account for female subjectivity in his *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism*, and Margaret Hanly's psychoanalytic account, while focusing on women, does not include lesbian subjectivity (Noyes 1999; Hanly 1995).

While there is available information about sadomasochism as pathology – from its original theorisations to later critiques of this model (Strachey 1961; Ellis 1938; Langdridge 2007; Kleinplatz 2014; Ortmann 2013),<sup>36</sup> through a feminist psychoanalytic lens (Hart 1998; Benjamin 1988), literary studies (Byrne 2013; Basu 2012) as well recent comprehensive ethnographies of various contemporary BDSM scenes and organisations, queer and straight (Weiss 2011; Bauer 2014; Newmahr 2011), there is not one, sustained historical study save Alex Warner's PhD thesis (2011) and one moderately lengthy chapter of a legal studies book (Khan 2014), and one chapter in a book about lesbian identity (Phelan 1989) that I am aware of that chronicles lesbian/feminist SM.<sup>37</sup> The most recent and comprehensive studies of sadomasochism each dedicate between one paragraph to a few pages for establishing a brief context and history, and often completely neglect the specifics of lesbian SM.

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<sup>35</sup> The one exception to this silence: "The singer Rihanna rocketed to the top of the pop charts this spring with her single, S&M, which pays homage to sex accompanied by whips, chains and the intentional infliction of pain. Having just finished the manuscript for my new book, *Battling Pornography*, I listened with amazement as this explicit song played freely on mainstream radio stations, not to mention in supermarkets and elevators. How many toe-tapping listeners, I wondered, knew that the question of sadomasochism electrified the American women's movement in the late 1970s and 1980s?" (Bronstein 2011c).

<sup>36</sup> See Chris White for an in-depth discussion of the importance of the Spanner Trials for the British context (2006). No similar legal event occurred in the US specifically regarding SM, although issues about sexuality certainly reached the court room, such as the Meese Commission as well as Catherine McKinnon's anti-porn laws, and involved feminist activist responses (Irvine 2008, pp.21–2; Pratt & Anderson 2006, p.63). Minnie Bruce Pratt calls Dworkin and McKinnon testifying for Meese "a nadir of feminism, feminist theory" (Ibid. p.63). But as Bronstein points out, WAP was much more committed to legal action than other anti-porn groups (2011b).

<sup>37</sup> Warner also states that this is the only study of its kind, and it remains true (2011, p.7). While Khan's chapter is indeed excellent with a lot of smart analysis, it is not an historical study based on extensive primary research.

Gay male sadomasochism fairs significantly better with a few dedicated studies (including Gayle Rubin, 1994; Thompson, 1991) and a lot less controversy.<sup>38</sup> For example, Ian Young's "Forum on Sadomasochism" is included in the 1978 anthology *Lavender Culture* (Jay & Young 1978), and is important for understanding the kinds of role models and support systems lesbian groups had.<sup>39</sup>

## 1.2 SM in feminist and lesbian histories

If we turn to lesbian and feminist history for more thorough attention to lesbian SM, we would be again disappointed. While it is certainly not completely absent, it most commonly appears as part of a larger collection of philosophical debates about the morality, ethics or relationships to patriarchy (Card 1995; Jeffreys 1993),<sup>40</sup> within the history of the sex wars (Duggan & Hunter 2006; Hoffman 2007; Freccero 1990; Seidman 2003) or as a side note in lesbian history (Faderman 1991). In some of the classic histories of the feminist movement, sadomasochism receives just two pages (Whittier 1995, pp.238–9), a line (Freedman 2002, p.270),<sup>41</sup> or simply silence (Rupp 2009; Crow 2000; Rosen 2000; Freedman 2007; Baxandall 2000). Writing in 1997, Kathleen Martindale suggests that:

Recent work in gay and lesbian studies recycles the same story about how the American feminist sex wars over sexual representation in the early 1980s created

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<sup>38</sup> Although because it was not the main focus of my thesis I did not do extensive research on gay media representation of gay male sadomasochism. Yet from some cursory investigation into the archives it seems as if the topic was raised earlier here. For example, one Stonewall 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of radical magazine *Fag Rag* included a "Reflections on the Gay Movement" with two paragraphs on SM critiquing Dennis Altman, an important early gay scholar, for his negative views towards SM but also notes the lack of writing about the topic (Norton 1974, p.15). *Body Politic* published a complaint letter to the Canadian Broadcasting association for their documentary on gay life which they claimed associated homosexuality with sadomasochism and pederasty (Hislop et al. 1972).

<sup>39</sup> For example, in a review of *Lavender Culture* in *Lesbian Tide*, Young's piece is mentioned dismissively, but not "a forum on sadomasochism (a kinky subject that turned out to be just plain boring)". Would the reaction be similar if it were not about gay men but instead lesbian SM? (Dragovich 1979). Faderman even calls gay men the "best allies" to lesbians who were interested in radical forms of sexuality (1991, p.254).

<sup>40</sup> Jeffries especially includes her much earlier essay "Sadomasochism: The Erotic Cult of Fascism" written in 1984, published in US in 1986 as an appendix to her history (1993, pp.171-190). Jeffreys was a member of LASM in London and thus her perspective is particularly useful for the British context (Jeffreys 1993, p.xvi).

<sup>41</sup> For example, *No Turning Back: the History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, touted as a complete and comprehensive history, has only one mention of sadomasochism, in a sub section called "Persistent Dangers: Feminists Debate Pornography and Sex Work, with the typical list context "pornography, prostitution, sadomasochism" but no direct attention (Freedman 2002, p.270).

lesbian category trouble, broke up the feminist cultural consensus, realigned lesbians with gay men and then brought forth the newest kid on the block: lesbian postmodernism (Martindale 1997, p.1).

But where is lesbian SM subjectivity in this common narrative? In fact, most of the classic feminist history texts do not mention it at all (MacLean 2009; Freedman 2007; Rosen 2000).

Yet the subject of lesbian sadomasochism is somehow everywhere and nowhere when one looks for traces of its presence in lesbian history. I scoured the classic texts on (gay and) lesbian history, and found not complete silence, but barely a whispery sentence dedicated to the topic. I developed an almost obsessive habit of, every time I saw a book even tangentially related to lesbian or feminist history, flicking immediately to the index and looking for key words like sadomasochism, leather, S&M, domination or submission, and Samois, only to be constantly disappointed with one mention on one page, footnotes (Rodríguez 2011; Duggan & Hunter 2006; Hollibaugh 2000; Kennedy 1993) or nothing at all (D’Emilio 1988; Aldrich 2006). Even more curiously, perhaps, are the histories that clearly acknowledge the importance of debates around lesbian SM in feminism, but fail to explain what lesbian SM itself *is* or expand on it in any detail. Even the excellent collection of essays by Nan Hunter and Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars*, falls into this category. Consider the following sentence: “We were ultimately shocked to find ourselves defending our activist communities—of sex workers, of butch-fem dykes, of lesbian sadomasochists—against political attacks, launched by feminists” (Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.5).

This is a very typical example of sadomasochism’s presence in these histories of lesbians, feminism and lesbian feminism. It seems welded to other forms of sexuality or lifestyles deemed deviant and perverse, appearing always in list format as one of many, never dealt with in detail or on its own. These are foundational texts that have shaped current

understandings of the lesbian past. According to them, the lesbian past either lacked SM or it was crucial, but what exactly it was remains unclear.<sup>42</sup>

There are some notable exceptions. For example, the UK has two books dedicated to this period that include moderate mention of SM, (Healey 1996; Green 1997). Joanna Boryczka, too, includes a chapter on lesbian sadomasochism, but the information seems to be garnered solely from *Coming to Power* and *Against Sadomasochism*, with no specific details (2012). Esteemed historian Lillian Faderman's canonical text is an example from the America context. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* has a few pages on SM, sometimes from an odd perspective indeed - she even suggests at one point that many lesbians saw SM as a way of avoiding "lesbian bed death" – and sees lesbian SM as a small hiccup in the history of sexuality (1991, pp.260–263).<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps even worse than no mention at all is the entry on SM in the epic, nearly 1000-page long encyclopedia *Lesbian Histories and Cultures*. It is written by none other than Reina Lewis, infamous for her vehement (and sometimes, as we will see in chapter four, frankly, ridiculous), anti-SM stance (Zimmerman 2003, pp.659–661). Clearly, an in-depth study of lesbian SM is well overdue.

### 1.3 Key secondary texts

Considering these many instances of lack, whom did I utilise to substantively ground my study? Using the well-established body of work on feminist and lesbian history I mention above allowed me to fit SM into the spaces that their narratives left unwritten, or in the case

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<sup>42</sup> Stonewall refers to an uprising of gay and transgender people at the Stonewall Inn in New York City's West Village in 1969. It is considered by some the beginning of the gay rights movement (see, for example, Martin Duberman's *Stonewall* (1994)).

<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless Faderman's claims could be true, but in my research at least I have not come across any mention of this argument and it seems to be rather minor to focus on when there are only three pages with SM in the entire book. The term "lesbian bed death" was coined by Pepper Schwartz and refers to the phenomenon of lesbians ceasing to have sex in long term relationships, although its accuracy has been queried since its initial theorisation (Blumstein 1983).

of Faderman, challenge and complexify her account (Rosen 2000; Freedman 2002; Faderman 1991). Phelan and Echols' work on lesbian feminism were also useful, if biased to the pro-sex/anti-radical feminist side (Echols 1989; Phelan 1989). Duggan and Hunter's collection of essays documenting the sex wars was also a crucial perspective on the wider political climate (Duggan & Hunter 2006). For a feeling of the time, and an insight into queer presents historicising this period of feminist history, Hoffman's memoir of her time as an editor at the *Gay Community News (GCN)* during the 1980s was invaluable (2007). Both Dorothy Allison and Amber Hollibaugh's collections of essays about their experiences as activists during the 1980s helped me gauge the intimate impact of fighting over how to understand the personal as political.

Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia are important and often lone voices who wrote positively and personally about SM and feminism at the time (as openly SM-identified lesbians) and have continued to do so today. I consulted both of their collected essays, Califia's *Public Sex* and Rubin's *Deviations* for both factual and ideological information (Rubin 2011b; Califia 2000). However, I am cautious when it comes to relying too heavily on either Califia or Rubin, writing from their specific and similar positionalities. As most the prolific writers on this topic both then and now, and as Samois members, Samois has become somewhat of a synecdoche for lesbian SM when in fact it was already disbanded as early as 1983, and there were many other longer-lasting groups supporting SM lesbians nationwide. Alex Warner's thesis on lesbian BDSM, while significant as the first of its kind and an excellent outline of some of the key events and publications, replicates this focus on Samois (2011), and does not present a strong argument that I was able to rigorously engage with. Nevertheless, primary sources and the theoretical insights they provide dominate my thesis.

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework and Approach

### 1.4.1 *Queering gay and lesbian history*

The last few decades have seen a development of social history and the so-called widening of history to include minoritarian subjectivities (Scott 1991; Scott 1999). Thus, in the 1980s for the first time, gay and lesbian history “came out” from the pages of 1950s “homophile” newsletters and self-published booklets into academia, and some gay activists swapped placards for paper-writing, a shift that was noted even at the time (Zimmerman 1980).<sup>44</sup> The importance of minorities and their subjugated knowledges has by now a firm footing in the door of even mainstream, institutionalised history, and yet, the history of lesbian sadomasochism remains an almost untouched minority history within a minority history. It is not white men who dominate the sexual history of the 1980s, but gay male sadomasochists and “politically correct” lesbians.

When we consider the origins of the histories of sexual minorities, mostly essentialist tomes written by gays and lesbians looking into the past to see themselves reflected and justify their political claims in the present (for example, Boswell, 1980), it makes sense that unruly types would be left out. What the following decades have seen is a process that parallels that of those known as the time as “homophile” writers: a desire to promote that which is politically beneficial to the dominant brand of “gay and lesbian” politics of the time.<sup>45</sup> In the 1950s and through most of the 1960s, assimilation was thought to be the quickest avenue to increased social equality, part of a wider, homophile-driven movement towards the “respectable homosexual from the more repugnant queer” (Houlbrook & Waters

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<sup>44</sup> Many of the first generations of gay and lesbian historians came from activist backgrounds, such as Elizabeth Wilson and Jeffrey Weeks.

<sup>45</sup> By “homophile” I mean the first gay and lesbian rights groups in the US in the 1950s, who identified themselves in this way such as Daughters of Bilitis (founded in 1952) and Mattachine Society (1950). See Marcia Gallo’s *Different Daughters* for an excellent history of the Daughters of Bilitis and the homophile movement (2006).



2006, p.145). In many ways, the lesbian feminist movement's repugnance with SM can also be seen as a continuation of these politics of respectability.

Just as 1950s "homophiles" were emotionally invested in their public image, queer theorist Heather Love posits that queer historians and critics are too emotionally invested in 'our' history (even if we know we shouldn't be), approaching "figures from the past with a sense of the inevitability of their progress toward us – of their place in the history of modern homosexuality" (Love 2007, p.3). Modern queers are their future, and thus "[their] existence in the present depends on being able to imagine these figures reaching out to [them]" (Love 2007, p.40). What has resulted is a "relentless return" of a "celebratory discourse of community", despite the well-worn paths exposing it as "conservative, disciplining and exclusionary" (Joseph 2002). Indeed, Carolyn Dinshaw suggests that her study of medieval sexualities sprung from a desire for "partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time" (1999, p.21). For me though, writing history is and will always be a political act. It comes from a desire to represent the past so that people in the present can be inspired, shocked, comforted and be given the imaginative ammunition to dream of a future. Dorothy Allison's *Lesbian Sex Mafia* was based entirely on consciousness raising techniques garnered directly from an old women's lib manual from the 1970s (1994). This small anecdote represents to me the ways in which feminist actors exchange knowledge even at the same time as they exchange blows. In this way my conception of history is non-linear, but allows for recognition of continuity and kinds of progress; much more like Foucault's definition of genealogy as an accumulation of *discontinuities*, rather than the erotic/affective mode of making the past result in our queer present (Foucault 1980a, p.139).

In the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian feminists were by and large less concerned with touching the past than with renouncing it, and trying to move *forward*. The discourse of gay liberation relies on Stonewall as a rupture between "the period of 'twilight lovers', shame and

shadows” and the proud and unified ‘dyke’ or ‘woman-identified woman’ sisterhood that replaced it (Koksi & Tilchen 1994, p.263). Domination and submission (and butch-femme, pornography and sex work) have been part of shame and shadows, not dyke liberation.

#### ***1.4.2 Foucault and the history of sexuality***

Foucault’s work transformed the playing field for writing about gay and lesbian history. Both the field of the history of sexuality and the development of understandings of sadomasochism can be traced back to the sexologists and psychoanalysts (Richard von Kraft-Ebbing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud, discussed in 2.1) working around the turn of the twentieth century. These processes were part of a reframing of thinking about sexuality, famously theorised by Michel Foucault, in which sexual acts were not simply considered as single acts, but instead as representing a stable sexual identity (Foucault 1980b; Halperin 1989; D’Emilio 1988). This is a crucial insight for my thesis as I track the emergence of lesbian sadomasochist as a recognisable sexual (but not always, as I explain) category. Studying sexual perverts without critical reflection on the power of language entrenches them as a static, naturally occurring group rather than a discursive construction, as Foucault has emphasised. It is not enough to merely insert accounts of traditionally marginalised experiences into existing historical narratives. This is despite that fact that, as Canning has noted, experience at one time was a foundational concept in that it “represented the promise of social history to render audible voices of previously silenced historical actors” (2006, p.101). This *reveals* the existence and oppression of homosexuals and others but it also aids in *creating* naturalised categories of difference. That is, experience of difference itself becomes the evidence of pre-existing categories of difference (Scott 1991, p.777).

Yet SM, like homosexuality, is self-conceptualised in various ways, from “born this way” to free choice models, as the diversity of experience in *Coming to Power* shows.<sup>46</sup> One of Foucault’s famous lines always sticks out for me in the context of sadomasochism. Since “the homosexual was now a species,” he writes,

nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away (Foucault 1980b, p.43).

Although Foucault himself never wrote about lesbian SM (or women in general),<sup>47</sup> I suggest that during my thesis’ time span, lesbian sadomasochist “was now an identity”. In 1979 Samois could write, “we believe that sadomasochists are an oppressed sexual minority. Our struggle deserves the recognition and support of other sexual minorities and oppressed groups” (1979, p.2). The lesbian sadomasochist is also marked by her sexuality: according to her opponent, her desires reflect an inner racism, fascism, violence and patriarchy. The SM debates reveal the investment the players had in sex revealing an inner truth, whether this was an internalised repression and submission, or an aggressive masculine dominance.

This thesis returns again and again, implicitly and explicitly to Foucault’s notion of discourses, powers and pleasures (1980, p.11). Foucault explains,

The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said (Foucault 1980b, p.11).

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<sup>46</sup> For example, Califia often describes having SM fantasies from the age of two (Wechsler 1981) while Sarah Zoftig (pp.86-96) and Sophie Schumuckler (pp.97-100) describe their forays into the scene later on, introduced to SM by women already involved (Samois 1981; Zoftig 1981; Schmuckler 1982).

<sup>47</sup> See “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women” (Hartsock 1987).

In Foucauldian terms then, this thesis explores the ways in which lesbian SM is “put into discourse” through violent and dramatic actions and letters to the editor, constituting a sex panic along the way (Foucault 1980b, p.11; Irvine 2008).<sup>48</sup>

In the wake of Foucault and social history, social constructivist histories of gay and lesbian subjects proliferated, offering versions of sexuality firmly grounded in their social, geographical, political and temporal context (D’Emilio 1988; Traub 2002; Dinshaw 1999; Duggan 2000; Halperin 1989; Kennedy 1993). In addition, critical studies questioning the ways in which an understanding of Foucauldian biopolitics impact definitions of sexual disorders began to question the pathologisation of both homosexuality, and for some, sadomasochism. This thesis, then, sits right on the intersection of the history of sexuality, the histories of psychology and the history of US feminism.

### ***1.4.3 Sex panics***

The crises over SM can be thought of in terms of a “sex panic” within the feminist community. In other words, “the political moment of sex,” or “the transmogrification of moral values into political action” (Irvine 2008, p.235). The term “sex panic” comes from sociologist Stanley Cohen’s 1964 theorisation of “moral panics and folk devils” (1972). A “folk devil” can be understood as “deviant individuals or groups seen as embodying a new or extraordinary social threat” (Krinsky 2013, p.5). A sex panic is then a “form or subspecies of moral panic” (Herdt 2009, p.5). Cohen emphasizes the importance of the mass media in creating moral panics with a snowball effect, representing the actors and actions concerned in “a highly stereotypical ways” (cited in Krinsky 2013, p.4). He explains, “we react to an episode of say, sexual deviance, drugtaking or violence in terms of our information about that

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<sup>48</sup> Taking Stuart Hall’s definition, I use “discourse” to mean “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (2006, p.165). For Foucault, the collection of statements that work together can be named a “discursive formation” - the way in which discourse, power and knowledge interact with specific discursive and other practices.

particular class of phenomenon (how typical it is), our tolerance level for that type of behaviour and our direct experience – which in a segregated urban society is often nil” (ibid). The intense focus on “folk devils” can in fact have the effect of “intensifying instead of suppressing the targeted deviance” (deviance amplification, Young (1971) and Cohen (1972). As I will show in my thesis, the concept of a moral panic can help explain SM’s out of proportion representation in the cultural imaginary during the 1980s (Herdt 2009, p.5).

#### ***1.4.4 How to write queer feminist history?***

This thesis is underlined by a desire to write and complexify the queer past as part of a kind of social activism, to celebrate the triumphs and the shame, and to trouble an idealistic or utopian notion of a “lost” lesbian community past. I am conscious that as someone involved in queer and sex positive activism I must not write a history in which I over-identify with the “right” side (which from the position of queer politics is pro-SM) and lazily make fun of the earnest activism of lesbian feminists of the past, as is so common nowadays in certain queer theory texts and third wave feminism.<sup>49</sup> History is an interpretative, not an empirical, profession. Indeed, as historian Hayden White reminds us, writing history is an inevitable process of narrativising, and “morality or a moralizing impulse” will be present too (1987, p.24). This is very much in line with the epistemology espoused by feminist science scholar Donna Haraway’s (1988) notion of “situated knowledges”, in which each intellectual actor produces a specific knowledge from their specific position. We know from Haraway (1997) that the concept of the “modest witness”, the researcher (or historian!) whose

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<sup>49</sup> Reading accounts of the period from “pro-sex” people involved in the sex wars (for example, Duggan & Hunter 2006; Rubin 2011a) it is easy to see the other side as almost comically misguided. But in fact, as I have spent more and more time with this material and these figures from the past, I have found that my own feelings about lesbian sadomasochism and anti-porn feminism have become complicated, my initial assumptions challenged and I have been on my own journey of thinking, rethinking and confusion. This is directly because of the smart challenges and responses that these lesbians take time to write and publish. By the same token, I wish to challenge a similar, generational attack that young people don’t know the history anymore (Rosen 2000, p.xiii). In doing this research I have been in contact with people of all ages, from all generations, genders and sexual orientations who have helped me and who are committed to preserving and exploring this history.

subjectivity is invisible, is dangerous. A key part of my methodology was being conscious of my own positionality both as I approached the archives, spoken with people, and evaluated the validity of both side's arguments. My voice is just writing and rewriting these histories without claiming to be writing *the* history of lesbian SM in the US.

## Chapter 2

### Historical Context and the Emergence of Lesbian SM

This chapter charts the move from the “lavender menace” – Betty Freidan’s term for lesbians in the women’s movement in the late 1960s, to the “leather menace” – the term Gayle Rubin gives to the imagined threat posted by SM to feminist values in the early 1980s (Echols 1989, pp.212–3). I wish to map out the context of the SM debates and describe the political, cultural and social climate in which anxieties about lesbian SM were first expressed through identifying the diverse strands of thought which have shaped notions of both “lesbian” and “somasochist”. First, I elucidate the history of somasochism as a sexual disorder. I note the persistence of this early-twentieth-century model of sadism and masochism into the 1970s and beyond, at the very same time that gay activists were challenging the pathologisation of homosexuality.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, using primary and secondary research, I attempt to weave lesbian SM’s place into the wider histories of the women’s liberation movement, lesbian feminism and the anti-pornography movement, which led to the “sex wars” (explained at length in the next chapter).<sup>51</sup> I dwell on controversies and conflicts in order to indicate that SM was not the first

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<sup>50</sup> In her dissertation on lesbian SM, Alex Warner does not include any information about the medical history of SM. While she does not explain this choice, I assume it might be to avoid further pathologising these desires. I do include this information, hopefully not to perpetuate a medical model of thinking but rather to show how it is flawed from the very beginning.

<sup>51</sup> Some notes on terminology: I use women’s liberation movement, women’s movement, women’s lib, and second wave feminism interchangeably.

challenge to the unity of the feminist movement, but a crucial one that historians have scarcely engaged with.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.1 Sadomasochism's history

Sadomasochism as a term, and a concept, and a 'disorder' or paraphilia has its own specific history infused with normative social mores, just as homosexuality does.<sup>53</sup> Sadomasochism is a combination of two words coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing,<sup>54</sup> sadism (enjoyment from causing pain on others) and masochism (enjoyment of feeling having pain or humiliation), both of which have their origins in 19th century Europe, when sexologists and psychoanalysts like Krafft-Ebing (1885), and later Havelock Ellis (1938; 1913) and Sigmund Freud (1889, began working to taxonomise and pathologise various "perverted" sexual behaviours and desires, including homosexuality (Bland 1998).<sup>55</sup> Of course such behaviour existed before medical labels were applied, but as Foucault so famously argues, the science of sex helped transform sexual *acts* into sexual *identities*, and this theorisation holds for sadomasochism as

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<sup>52</sup> I am certainly not the first historian to discuss the disunity of the movement, but discussions specifically relating to SM are absent. See Anne Valk's *Radical Sisters* (2008), which looks at second wave feminism and black liberation, for example or, Anne Enke's *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (2007).

<sup>53</sup> For an excellent account of homosexuality (including lesbianism) and medicalisation/sexology/pathology see Jennifer Terry's book *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, especially chapter 9 (1999). Terry does not mention in detail how sadomasochism, another pathologised sexual practice and desire, fits into this schema. She does quote psychoanalyst George W. Henry linking a patient's homosexual desires to her sadomasochist ones, but does not expand further; this would be an interesting line to pursue (see pp.241-2).

<sup>54</sup> We see too that Krafft-Ebing had questionable methods of acquiring his "expertise". He did not carry out a large-scale study to write so authoritatively on sadism and masochism. Instead he based his findings largely on anecdotal evidence coming from his patients (predominantly offenders who had entered the German justice system), and, unbelievably, literary figures created by Sacher-Masoch and Sade (Bauer 2014, p.6). Already it is evident that the so-called authority on the subject was not speaking from a place of detailed or "objective" knowledge. For a very detailed account of sadomasochism in sexology and psychology from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, see Khan (2008), chapter 1. See also recent psychological texts outlined in my literature review (for example, Langdrige, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> Scholars tend to see this as a bad thing but it is not necessarily a discourse used to actively pathologise SM people. Thomas Murray and Thomas Murrell (in their sympathetic but not insider study of SM language) dedicate it to the "memory of Richard von Kraft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud who legitimized the scholarly study of sadomasochism" (Murray 1989, dedication).



well (1980).<sup>56</sup> Sexologists Vern and Bonnie Bullough, in their history of sexual attitudes, note: “Sadomasochism is a good example of the way a pathological condition is established by the medical community, for until it became a diagnosis [in 1952] it received little attention and was not even classified as a sin” (1977, p.210). Furthermore, sadomasochism desires are highly gendered in the sexological and psychoanalytical models. Masochism is seen largely as a female trait and sadism a masculine one.<sup>57</sup> These understandings of the inherent gendered basis of sadism and masochism clearly reflect the gender norms of the time in which they were imagined. This gendered conception of SM desires persists well into the 1970s and beyond (Pomerleau 2014, p.203), mapping neatly onto feminist theories of male violence.<sup>58</sup>

With the professionalisation and institutionalisation of psychiatry in across the Atlantic in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sadism (but not masochism) was included in the very first American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), an official diagnostic tool published in 1952, and again in the DSM-II in 1968 (although now it

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<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Kraft-Ebing coined both the terms sadism and masochism in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) from authors writing in previous centuries, Austrian Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in the 19th, and the infamous French writer the Marquis de Sade in the 18th (Krafft-Ebing 1997). There is an interesting question that is strictly speaking outside the scope of this study, about why the homo/hetero binary ended up becoming the central node of modern sexuality and not other paraphilia like SM—in this time period we can see there was no particular emphasis on one type of perversion over another. Masturbation, really, seemed more likely to found the modern concept of sexual identity, but didn’t end up quite doing that. Eve Sedgwick muses on that in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

<sup>57</sup> In Krafft-Ebing, masochism is essentially an inherently female trait and sadism a male one that occurs in civilised societies only through a lack of containing an animalistic excess of urges (Khan 2008, p.41). Freud too considered sadism a straightforwardly masculine instinct, although he grappled longer with the concept of masochism, thinking and rethinking his theories numerous times (Khan 2008, p.41). Sexologist Havelock Ellis, by contrast, conceived of sadism and masochism as two sides of the same coin, and normal in the period of courtship for both males and females (1938). However, should this exceed “mild” pain, it becomes no longer a normal, gendered dynamic but rather a pathological way of attempting to bolster hypo-sexuality: “the sadist and the masochist alike merely use pain as a method of drawing on a great reservoir of primitive emotion, which imparts energy to a feeble sexual impulse” (Ellis quoted in Khan, 2008, p. 51).

<sup>58</sup> For example, radical anti-pornography feminist Susan Brownmiller claimed that “hardly 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” (1975, p.292).

was a “paraphilia” rather than a “disorder”),<sup>59</sup> alongside homosexuality, fetishism, paedophilia, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sadism, masochism and “other sexual deviations” (Khan 2014).<sup>60</sup> Khan points out that there are in fact no definitions provided in the DSM. The closest that one can get is that sadism involves “coitus... performed under bizarre circumstances”; the language already indicating the moral judgment inherent in this classification. This was the official medical view on SM in the period when my study begins, the 1970s.

The DSM-III (1980), by contrast, includes pages and pages of examples and explanations of what “S” and “M” behaviours could entail. Yet even with all this space to provide a nuanced and balanced opinion, it does not distinguish between sadists who have consensual partners and those who do not, while masochists are deprived of all agency altogether.<sup>61</sup> Many sadists and masochists would simply not recognise themselves or their desires in such definitions. Anthropologist Andrea Beckmann writes: “In past and present, the social construction of ‘perversion,’ and that of ‘sadoomasochism’ in particular, is always based on the ‘relational distance’ between the ‘sexual’ behavior in question and ‘normal coitus,’ the established norm of ‘heterosexuality’ (2001, p.67). Both in leaving the disorder or paraphilia undefined or under-defined, sadoomasochistic desires are constructed as simply bizarre, abnormal and non-normative desires that require correction and intervention by the psycho-

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<sup>59</sup> “Paraphilia” is a condition that involves “abnormal sexual desires, typically involving extreme or dangerous activities” (Apple OS Dictionary).

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed account of the sexological, psychoanalytic as well as changes to the DSM, please consult chapter 1 of *Vicarious Kinks* (Khan 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Part of this is also likely because of Freud’s indirect legacy on the definition of a fetish: for the fetishist, the fetish entirely replaces all other forms of erotic satisfaction, so that, if we imagined a “true” foot fetishist, this would be someone who could never, ever under any circumstances have an orgasm without a foot being involved. Hence “agency” or volition and consent on the part of someone engaged in a paraphilia is, for modern psychiatry, irrelevant — the behaviour is understood as a compulsive replacement for normal sexual behaviour. The DSM is not self-reflexive enough to acknowledge any of that, of course.

medical profession, and are vulnerable to repressive measures from society and the state.<sup>62</sup> Although, Califia notes, “vanilla heterosexuality is still the psychiatric gold standard,” and consensual SM and violence remain undistinguished from each other (1994, p.141).<sup>63</sup>

However, as scholar Robin Bauer points out, the way in which “perverse” sexuality has been created as distinct from “normal” sexuality obscures the fluidity that exists between those who are “into SM” and those who are “vanilla”, i.e. not practicing sadomasochism (2014, p.5). The figure of the lesbian sadomasochist is, in the medical model of thinking, easier to identify and isolate, when in fact SM is perhaps more like a *continuum*, from love bites to 24/7 master/slave lifestyles, much like lesbianism itself, as lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich so eloquently suggests (1980). One personal ad from the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* in 1985 illustrates that at least some understood this, although it does not seem to be the majority opinion:

Bright, Attractive, L.A. Fem – Scorpio working in the film industry seeks sexy butch 30+ with brains, ambition, style, intuition, and an aware, generous, and loving nature. Upwardly mobile, politically aware, spiritually inclined, nature/film/animal lovers, vegetarians, cooks, and Dildo aficionados please apply! Into roles,<sup>64</sup> not oppression! Looking for friend/Life Partner. *Mild Bondage is fun...* No smokers, please! (“Personals,” 1985, emphasis mine).

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<sup>62</sup> Spanner trials in Britain in 1990 are one example of this - a case in the UK where 16 gay men practicing consensual SM were charged with assault and imprisoned or fined. For all the details of this case, see Chris White (2006). Around this time we can see a growing understanding of SM people as united by their desires and in need of a movement like gay liberation. Patrick Califia suggests that it was only recently (writing in 1994) that “the notion that we might be a unified group of people with an agenda for legal reform or social change is fairly new to leather, S/M and fetish people, but the process of radicalization has become” (1994, p.140). This newfound sense of community – if indeed it existed – is outside the scope of this present study, but would certainly have its origins in the ways in which lesbian SM identity was constructed and challenged during the 1980s.

<sup>63</sup> In 1994, after the period covered by my thesis, thanks to lobbying from SM individuals and SM-sympathetic mental health workers, the DSM-IV altered the entries on sadism and masochism: they were still considered psychopathologies but only when the desires caused “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning”, the standard applied to most sexual and gender identity disorders, too (Khan 2014).

<sup>64</sup> “Roles” during this time period refers to “butch” and “femme”.

An interest in “mild bondage” (not defined), followed by suggestive ellipsis, does not mention SM specifically, but simply mentions a practise she enjoys without an identity or label. It sits comfortably with her dislike of smokers and love of animals.

Despite these moments of continuum-style thinking, even as pathologised theories of homosexuality were being debunked by gay and lesbian activists as Jennifer Terry so deftly outlines, the figure of the sadomasochist has remained “part of a psychopathological personality or as a subcultural identity” (Bauer 2014, p.5; Terry 1999). Whereas homosexuality has been reconceived in numerous ways that work outside a medical model sadomasochism has avoided intimate querying.<sup>65</sup>

This history is significant as it illustrates how sadomasochism, in many ways, like homosexuality, has been pathologised and medicalised, sometimes literally on the same page, but its status as sexual deviation and paraphilia was not challenged until the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Puotinen summarizes Rubin nicely: “Sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms. The body, the brain, the genitalia and the capacity for language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional

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<sup>65</sup> Examples of non-medical models include seeing homosexuality as a political choice, a lifestyle, an inborn characteristic, one small part of one’s whole makeup (see for an outline Ginzberg 1992).

<sup>66</sup> Certainly all sexual disorders as outlined in the various versions of the DSM have not been rethought or challenged. Paedophilia, for example, remains firmly and mostly uncontroversially in the category of disease, but even this has been also questioned by some pro-SM advocates, and Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia infamously were believed to support NAMBLA, the North American Man-Boy Love Association, although Califia has clarified that she only supported their petition against harassment by the FBI, and Rubin too focuses on their government harassment (Califia 1983b, p.599; Rubin 2011b, pp.112–3; Rubin 1984). Nevertheless, Rubin has written things such as “not all adults who have sex with minors are harming them”, and notes the frequency of cross-generational sex amongst gay men (2011b, p.113). However, *Bad Attitude* editor Amy Hoffman describes her own U-turn on this issue, believing her earlier support to have been naïve, and too trusting of the men around her (2007, p.123). This has been a dividing line for many who support sexual freedom but who are not so sure on the issue of children and teenager’s capacity to consent.

forms” (Puotinen 2011).<sup>67</sup> Rubin is certainly right to note that “sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance” (1984).

However, as reference to the sex wars and SM (and importantly dildos, butch/femme, and pornography also, as we will see later) debates illustrates, the significance modern, Western culture ascribes to sexual acts is overwhelmingly moral rather than ontological or epistemological. Non-coital, “immature” forms of sexuality are demonised in these terms through institutional biopower (Foucault 1980b).<sup>68</sup> These pathological origins have continued to impact reactions to SM throughout the period this thesis covers and beyond (Califia & Sweenet 1996, p.xv).

## 2.2 The US feminist movement 1970s-1980s

The feminist movement has at times, as I will outline, been infamous for hierarchising certain sexual acts from most (SM) to least (non-penetrative, lesbian lovemaking) patriarchal, and de-emphasising the importance of others (sexual desire and sex in general). Rubin’s charmed circle was prepared for the conference diary of 1982’s IX Scholar and Feminist Conference at Barnard College in New York City. Picketed by anti-SM, anti-pornography feminists, it was an event considered by many to mark the beginning of the feminist sex wars, a period of inter-feminist conflict within the second wave of the feminist/women’s movement.<sup>69</sup>

But first I wish to go back a few years to the beginning of the “second wave” of the women’s movement itself. The origins and nature of the second wave have been well-

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<sup>67</sup> One institution with which I do not engage much is the religion. As far as I know, religious bodies did not comment overtly on SM during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, but religious norms and morals impacted the wider climate of sexuality. One recent sphere where religion and sadomasochism intersect is a highly sexist form of interaction known as Christian Domestic Discipline, in which the wife is completely submissive to the husband, as God apparently intended (Anon n.d.).

<sup>68</sup> Foucault’s concept of state powers controlling life and liberty through notions of “health”, for example.

<sup>69</sup> While there are critiques of the usefulness the metaphor of “waves” to describe feminist movements, I will use them here as a temporal marker, with full understanding that under this broad categorisation there falls cultural feminists, radical feminists, socialist feminists (Echols 1989). See especially Echols’ chapters “The Eruption of Difference” (pp.203-243) and “The Ascendancy of Cultural Feminism” (pp.243-369) for an in depth exploration of the different types of feminisms that made up the US movement.

documented elsewhere, both at the time and looking back, so I will not go into great detail except where I see it being directly relevant for understanding the SM debates to come.<sup>70</sup>

It is tricky to pinpoint the exact moment at which some sort of feminist critical mass occurred and “women’s lib” began, but certainly it came out of the New Left and Civil Rights movement (Snitow et al. 1983, p.25). Nevertheless, some credit the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 with the beginning of a consciousness raising (or at least a symbolic beginning) and the shared knowledge amongst women that they were not alone in their disillusionment with their life as housewives, part of a longer movement that was building and rumbling – Ruth Rosen calls it the “dawn of discontent” (2000, p.3).<sup>71</sup> The second wave of feminism spanned from this point onwards (although not with a few false declarations of its imminent demise along the way) until it was supposedly replaced with third wave feminism in the early 1990s (ibid., pp.xii–xiii).<sup>72</sup>

### 2.3 Lesbian feminism in the US 1970s-1980s

Regretfully, the US women’s movement itself was not immune to the rampant homophobia of society, either replicating directly or indirectly by fearing the repercussions of lesbians “discrediting” the movement (Alexander 2006; Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.18).

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<sup>70</sup> Ruth Rosen’s history, including her extremely useful timeline, which opens her book, is a good place to start for a history of the women’s movement (2000), although as I lament in my literature review, one will not find any mention of SM.

<sup>71</sup> Snitow, Stansell and Thompson, however, suggest that Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949, but translated and widely read in America in the 1960s) was more attuned to the erotic, and they criticise the influence of Friedan’s “profound distrust of sexual liberation” (Snitow et al. 1983, p.26).

<sup>72</sup> This story is widely told elsewhere (Freedman 2002; Rosen 2000), but to give a short overview: In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded, with local chapters forming all over the US. Over the next fifteen years or so consciousness-raising groups were formed, organisations and newsletters were proliferated, feminist books were published, rape crisis centres and battered women’s shelters were established, and feminist of colour groups founded. In 1969 the Stonewall riots marked the beginning of the gay liberation movement, a movement that existed sometimes harmoniously and sometimes less so with the women’s movement. This did not occur outside the noxious influence of the Republican and religious Right either, and challenges to LGBT and women, such as Anita Bryant’s anti-gay campaigns (for example, “Save Our Children” in 1977), the Briggs Initiative that banned gay and lesbian teachers in California schools (1978), the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment to be passed in 1982, anti-abortion measures and claims of a postfeminist era as early as the 1980s (Whittier 1995, p.2).

“Dyke baiting”, in which opponents of the movement condemned it by accusing all feminists of being lesbians, was not strongly denounced by the loudest voices of the women’s movement (D’Emilio 1988, p.316). Friedan herself was a well-known culprit, labelling lesbians the “lavender menace” in 1969, so-called “lesbian purges” occurred in which known lesbians were removed from positions of power, and out lesbian Rita Mae Brown resigned from her job at NOW in protest (Echols 1989, pp.212–3).

In 1970 the group who would later name themselves the Radicalesbians published a manifesto in response to the lesbophobia of the women’s movement at large. Bursting into the second Congress to Unite Women (dubbed by some the “Congress to Divide Women”) in New York in 1970, wearing tee shirts emblazoned with “Lavender Menace”, they read their *The Women-Identified Woman* an act that Rosen notes was one of the first “asserting the right to be public lesbians” (Rosen 2000, p.xxiii; Davis 1991, p.264; Echols 1989, p.214).<sup>73</sup> This move was not forgotten by later pro-sex feminists; the *On Our Backs* magazine “Sexual Lesbians Manifesto” from Summer 1986 mimics its style, but also implies that this type of feminist was remembered and mocked as utterly un-sexual (*On Our Backs*, 1986, (2)5, p.2) (Ginsburg 2013b, p.106; Anon 1986b). While the next NOW national conference in 1971 adopted a resolution stating the importance of lesbian rights, many lesbians considered this lip service only and nevertheless left NOW.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Karla Jay, a member who was there, describes the event evocatively and captures some of its play and humour: “I stood up and yelled, ‘Yes, yes, sisters! I’m tired of being in the closet because of the women’s movement.’ Much to the horror of the audience, I unbuttoned the long-sleeved red blouse I was wearing and ripped it off. Underneath, I was wearing a Lavender Menace T-shirt. There were hoots of laughter as I joined the others in the aisles. Then Rita [Mae Brown] yelled to members of the audience, ‘Who wants to join us?’, ‘I do, I do,’ several replied. Then Rita also pulled off her Lavender Menace T-shirt. Again, there were gasps, but underneath she had on another one. More laughter. The audience was on our side” (Jay 1999, p.143).

<sup>74</sup> Indeed, and as some back-and-forward in the pages of *off our backs* shows, even in 1980 the lesbophobia of some in the women’s movement as well as the anti-pornography movement was felt; “Where are all the militant dykes?” some frustrated militant dykes asked (Gottlieb & Kessler 1980). This feeling of rejection bolstered the rise of lesbian feminism.



**Figure 9** At a demonstration in New York City. The woman's sign reads "LESBIAN = woman identified woman = dyke = lavender menace = human being = woman loving woman = me" (date unknown, circa early 1980s, photo by Bettye Lane, LHA collection).

Within the lesbian feminist branch of the feminist movement one's lifestyle and personal behaviour – the personal is political – became more important than one's political actions and



convictions.<sup>75</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson's phrase is emblematic: "Feminism is the theory; but Lesbianism is the practice" (Snitow et al. 1983, p.30). Some feminists cast lesbianism as more spiritual or political than sexual (Morgan, 1977). But indeed, with the insights of essays like Anne Koedt's "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1970), there were hardly any political or sexual advantages to continue sleeping with men (Snitow et al. 1983, p.29). Adrienne Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum", theorised in her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" puts lesbianism as a choice that any woman can make – a choice that rejects patriarchy, rather than expressing an innate sexual desire for women (1980). One of countless examples of this type of rhetoric (see Echols, 1989, pp. 216–18) can be found in Los Angeles feminist journal *Everywoman* in 1971, who wrote, "fortunately, Lesbianism never really had anything to do with men, despite all attempts at interference, and as a consequence remains the only viable pursuit left on earth as pure as snow, ego-free, and non-profit" (Helenius 1971). Or another, in *Lesbian Voices*,<sup>76</sup> where Barbara Ruth (under the pseudonym Barbara Lipschutz) penned "Nobody Needs to Get Fucked" in September 1975. Abandon "the male-model of penetration and orgasm," she urges, and rethink "lovemaking". "Holding hands is love-making. Touching lips is love-making. Rubbing breasts is love-making. Locking souls with women by looking deep in their eyes is love-making" (quoted in

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<sup>75</sup> A large amount of what one needs to know about lesbian-feminism can be acquired from popular lesbian folk musicians of the 1970s, like Alix Dobkin (who, for the record, was vocally anti-sadomasochism (Dobkin 2000)) Her song "View from Gay Head" (Dobkin 1973) goes a little something like this:

(chorus)  
 Lesbian, lesbian  
 Let's be in no man's land  
 Lesbian. Lesbian  
 Any woman can be a Lesbian

<sup>76</sup> A lesbian newsletter published in San Jose 1974–1981.

Faderman, 1991, pp. 231–2).<sup>77</sup> Taking for granted, as Linda Gardner’s review of *Pleasure and Danger* (Vance 1984) in *Bad Attitude* puts it, that “the real function of sex was to be the male instrument (pun intended) for terrorizing and exploiting women.” (Gardiner 1985, p.15). To be free of patriarchy, they argue, one had to be free from men and men’s ways altogether.

This was an important intervention from lesbian feminists, as lesbians had, in the past, been defined solely as sick, perverted individuals with the wrong kinds of sexual urges. In other words, the basis of lesbians’ definition was their “abnormal” desire. Furthermore, women lesbians were subjected to male objectification and sexualisation like all women, and furthermore two women together was a staple in heterosexual male pornography and popular culture. But the de-sexualisation and political lesbianism went too far for many. In the process essentialising femininity as “pure as snow”, gentle, soft and caring, alienating and distressing women who could not or did not want to meet these standards, or who were heterosexually inclined sexually but lesbian feminist-y inclined politically. At the same time as lesbians were defined by their sexual desires, their sexual expressions were often accused of not being real sex without a man’s involvement.

The exaltation of lesbians (as long as they weren’t into s/m, butch-femme roles, or other forms of literal or metaphorical violence) as the practitioners of a truly feminist sexuality turned out all too often to rest on a new version of the slur that we thought we had laid to rest – the belief that whatever lesbians did do in bed, it wasn’t really having sex (Gardiner 1985, p.15).

Some women stopped having sex altogether, and others, like Esther Newton, repressed her (non-SM) topping desires to “conscientiously to have the ‘egalitarian’ sex demanded by

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<sup>77</sup> In this formulation one can easily see how sadomasochism has no place as lovemaking; how it could be the “fucking” in her title that lesbians don’t need. However, Barbara Ruth was in fact one of the first lesbian feminists to be open (writing in her own name, not with the Lipschutz pseudonym) about her masochism in an article in *Plexus* (Ruth 1975). Both these articles appeared in 1975; so this does not indicate a change in views. She was clear that SM “is only possible for women within a lesbian-feminist context.” Rather, perhaps we can extrapolate that for Ruth, SM was another way of not fucking, but making love – non-orgasm and penetration-focused form of sexuality. “Now that we have withdrawn power over our sexuality from the man”, she asks, “Are we secure enough to play with it, to explore amongst ourselves parameters’ of dominance and submission?” In this way of thinking about it, SM indeed has the potential to undermine heteropatriarchal forms of sex.

feminism without much success” (Newton & Walton 1989, p.243). *Bad Attitude* contributor Linda Gardiner complained that because so many forms of “a truly feminist sexuality” – what she sees as freedom to follow one’s desires – were condemned, “lesbianism could be the theory as long as celibacy was the practice” (1985, p.15).

Already we can see conflicts, well before the so-called sex-wars, often centred around issues that would later come to be known as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) – in other words, grappling with the idea that women were not just women and women first, but that each woman also had a race, class, sexual orientation, and so on which influenced the ways in which women face oppression in the world. However, cultural feminists accused women who did not identify as women and women first as “male-identified” “dupes of the male left” and “anti-feminist” (1989, p.281; see also Freccero 1990, p.309).<sup>78</sup>

This will soon enough sound glaringly familiar when we come to critics of SM in the next chapter; although this time it would be editors accusing SM feminists of being male-identified. Rubin was certainly exactly on point in identifying and criticising a system of sexual hierarchies in her seminal “Thinking Sex” (1984), forming the basis of the conflict made so evident at Barnard, conflict between radical and cultural and socialist and liberal feminists pervaded the decade before, and not simply on issues of sexuality. Sadomasochism was certainly a bone of contention, but if anything it was one of the straws breaking the (feminist) camel’s back.

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<sup>78</sup> Echols defines cultural feminists as those who envisioned “building a women’s culture guided by ‘female’ values.”(1989, p.272). This type of feminism is also known as “radical” or “essentialist”. For example, in 1975, the authors of *New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook* accused *off our backs* of “switch[ing] its emphasis from national news reporting with a radical feminist slant to focussing on intra-movement factionalism, from what appears to be a predominantly male left perspective” (Grimstad & Rennie 1975, p.139).

## 2.4 Hierarchising sex from a feminist perspective

“The legitimating power of emotions naturalizes sexual hierarchies, establishing some sexualities as normal and others as disgusting or unspeakable”, suggests Irvine (2008, p.3). Gayle Rubin literally illustrated these forms of demonisation in a hand-drawn graphic she names “The Sex Hierarchy”, prepared for the Barnard Conference in 1982 (Love 2011), later appearing in *Pleasure and Danger* (see figures 11 and 12) (Vance 1984).

All these hierarchies of sexual value—religious, psychiatric, and popular— function in much the same way, as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism. They rationalized well being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble. It is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation. Variation is the property of all life. . . . Yet sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard. One of most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way” (Rubin 1984, pp.152–4).

While her article was ground breaking and often cited, she was not the first to point out the ways in which sex has been polarised (although always with murky bits in between). In her half satirical article in the *Village Voice*, Ellen Willis writes:

There are two kinds of sex, classical and baroque. Classical sex is romantic, profound, serious, emotional, moral, mysterious, spontaneous, abandoned, focused on a particular person, and stereotypically feminine. Baroque sex is pop, playful, funny, experimental, conscious, deliberate, amoral, anonymous, focused on sensation for sensation's sake, and stereotypically masculine. The classical mentality taken to an extreme is sentimental and finally puritanical; the baroque mentality taken to an extreme is pornographic and finally obscene [...] Thus the basic axiom of establishment baroque is that consensual sex in any form is wholesome and good for you [...]” (Willis 1979a).

Willis even has a list not dissimilar to Rubin’s, listing the appropriate time, location, number of participants, lighting, clothing, food,<sup>79</sup> drugs, music, pornography, sex manuals, devices

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<sup>79</sup> I wish I had space to include this entire article, but instead I will simply quote from my favourite item on the list, food: “Eating in bed is baroque, although artichoke hearts and sour cream are more classical than potato chips and pizza. Tongues, tastes, and flavors are inherently baroque. Comparing sex with food is usually middlebrow baroque, except when a classicist, quarreling with the baroque idea that getting off is getting off no matter how you do it, points out that ‘Steak and hamburger may both be protein but they still taste different.’ Putting food anywhere but in your mouth is superbaroque” (Willis 1979a).

(“All technology is baroque, including contraceptives, vibrators, and air conditioning”), sexism, feminism and national characters for baroque and classical styles.

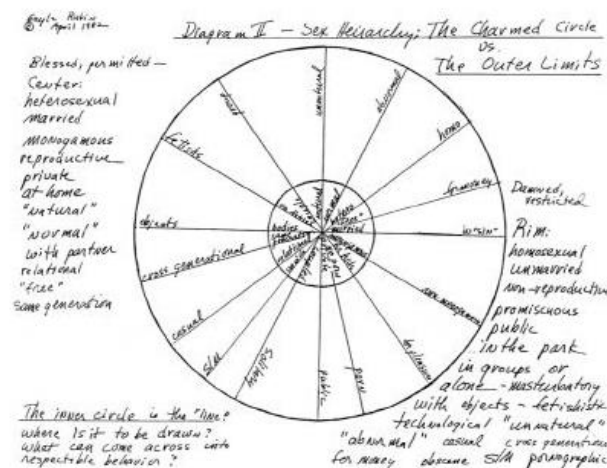


Figure 1. The Sex Hierarchy: The Charmed Circle vs. the Outer Limits

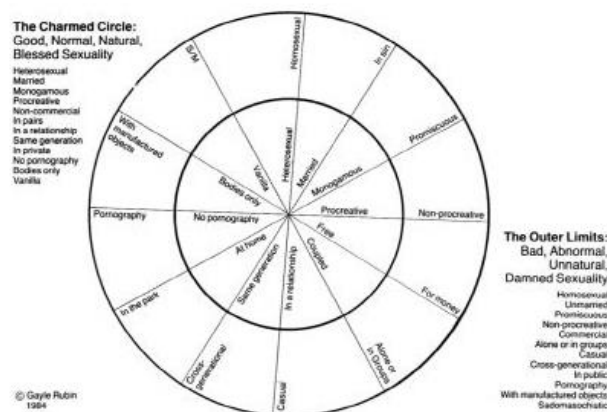
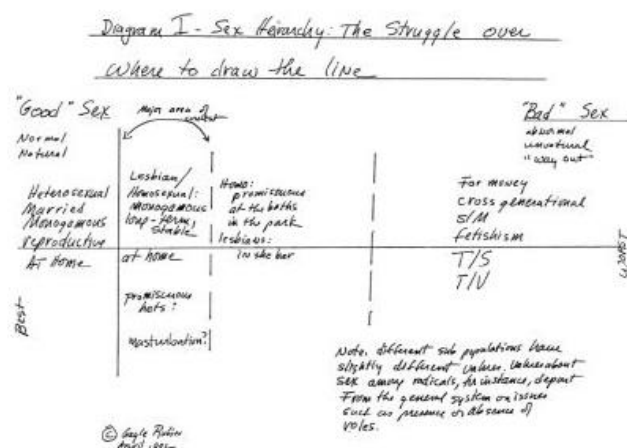


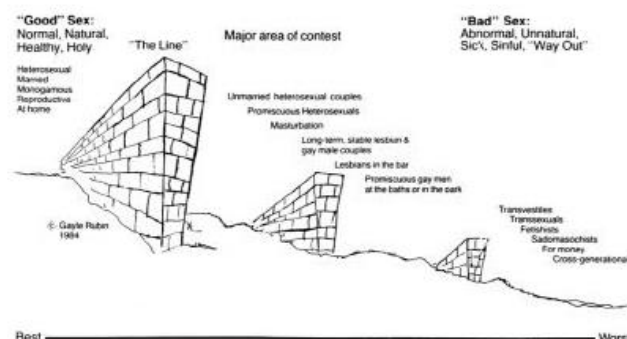
Figure 10 “The Sex Hierarchy: The Charmed Circle vs. the Outer Limits” in both its incarnations, the hand-drawn version above from Rubin’s conference hand out and the one below from *Pleasure and Danger* (Rubin 2011b, p.151).

Rubin first presents us with the “Charmed Circle vs. the Outer Limits”. We see that in her conception, it is not just SM that falls outside the charmed circle: homosexual, non-monogamy, age difference, sex toys, public sex, non-procreative, promiscuous and other forms of sexual interaction are deemed perverse. Remove “homosexual” from the condemned

acts and we can see this system of values is largely true within sectors of the lesbian community as well.<sup>80</sup>



**Figure II. The Sex Hierarchy: The Struggle Over Where to Draw the Line**



**Figure 11 “The Sex Hierarchy: The Struggle Over Where to Draw the Line” in both its incarnations, the hand-drawn version above from Rubin’s conference hand out and the one below from *Pleasure and Danger* (Rubin 2011b, p.153). We can see it move from “Good” sex, past “The Line” into “major areas of contest” and finally into “Bad” sex.**

Second, she illustrates “the Struggle Over Where to Draw the Line”. In this conception, sadomasochism is very clearly in the category of “bad”, abnormal, “way out” sex, just where the sexologists and psychiatrists put it a hundred years earlier. Or as Willis might term it, very Baroque.

<sup>80</sup> The gay male community, on the other hand, has at least a longer history of public sex and other non-charmed practices (See Chauncey, 1994, for example).

## 2.5 The beginnings of anti-pornography feminism

The anti-pornography and lesbian separatist feminists have some (il)logical arguments in common, conflating violence, men, heterosexuality and patriarchy: writer Ellen Willis characterises their position as, “in a patriarchy, all sex with men is pornographic” (1979b, p.465; see also Dworkin 1981 and Griffin 1981). Like separatists, they were also some of lesbian sadomasochists loudest critics.



**Figure 12 Anti-pornography feminists demonstrating, exact date and location unknown, probably California, late 1970s/early 1980s (Bettye Lane Collection, LHA).**

Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), who would become a key voice against pornography and also against sadomasochism, was founded in 1976 in Los Angeles with local chapters forming soon afterwards. Their focus was sexist images in the media (Russell 1993, p.271). A similar group, Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) was formed in San Francisco the same year. Sociologist Diana Russell, a founding member of WAVPM – and one of the editors of *Against Sadomasochism* – wrote

that the group's founding was a push to include the issue of pornography on the women's liberation agenda (Russell 1993, pp.7–8). Their goal was to challenge what they saw as the sexist research on pornography and argue that pornography eroticizes violence against women and sexism, causing rape, assault and murder.<sup>81</sup> Their motto was, "Pornography is the theory; rape the practice."<sup>82</sup> Their methods were "shocking" slideshows and feminist tours of red light districts.<sup>83</sup>

WAVPM inspired the founding of a similar group on the east coast in 1978, originally another branch but what quickly became an independent group, Women Against Pornography (WAP), based in New York who would go on to spearhead the battle at Barnard (see 3.2).

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<sup>81</sup> Russell outlines their goals as follows: "(1) To educate woman and men about the woman-hatred expressed in pornography and other media violence to women, and to increase understanding of the destructive consequences of these images; (2) To confront those responsible—for example, the owners of pornographic stores and theaters, those who devise violent images on record covers, newspapers that give a lot of space to advertising pornographic movies, politicians who give out permits for 'live shows,' pornographic bookstores, etc.; (3) To put an end to all portrayals of women being bound, raped, tortured, killed, or degraded for sexual stimulation or pleasure. We believe that the constant linking of sexuality and violence is dangerous" (1993, p.24).

<sup>82</sup> For other considerations of the anti-pornography movement, see Lederer 1980; Brownmiller 1999; Bronstein 2011a; Downs 1989; Strub 2011. For feminist views on pornography, both historical and contemporary, see Penley et al. 2013; McElroy 1995.

<sup>83</sup> WAP's Times Square Tours were particularly infamous amongst feminists and garnered much critique (Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.7). In displaying women working in the sex industry as a horror show to be viewed by "good" feminists, they were doing no favours to the women in question. Amber Hollibaugh commented on the implicit classism of parts of the feminist movement in 1982: "I've always been more ashamed of having been a dancer in night clubs when I have talked about it in feminist circles than I ever felt in my hometown, working class community." (1989, pp.403–4) The slideshows too were often mocked for acting as a collection of images that many found arousing. For example, Califia's closing sentence in a letter to *off our backs* after the Barnard conference: "But as long as I get treated with more respect in an adult bookstore than I do at a presentation of the WAP slideshow, you all know where you can find me if you'd care to continue this, ahem, discussion" (1983b, p.597). Judith Butler has theorised this phenomenon with words in her book *Excitable Speech*, but I suggest it holds for images too: "Language that is compelled to repeat what it seeks to constrain invariably reproduces and restages the very speech that it seeks to shut down" (1997).





**Figure 13 Kathleen Barry and companion picketing the Ultra Room, an SM-themed live sex show (San Francisco) in 1977. Her sign reads, “Pornography Is a Lie about Women”. The woman’s behind her reads, “Who Says Pain Is Erotic?” in reference to SM (Bronstein 2011b).**

However, I take my cues from media scholar Carolyn Bronstein, whose work *Battling Pornography* rewrites the misleading, monolithic view of anti-pornography feminism, outlining the political and tactical differences between these groups even as they saw themselves as “sister organizations”. WAP was much more extreme than either WAVAW or WAVPM, who tended to be less essentialist, less interested in legal remedies and more liberal towards variation in sexual practise.<sup>84</sup>

While Russell tried to downplay critique, in describing that in the 1980s, just some “feminist skeptics” did not agree with this premise, including “a few academics, socialist feminists, feminists who supported sadomasochism for lesbians, among others”, underplayed

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<sup>84</sup> WAVAW focused less on pornography and more on violent images in the media; WAVPM was a “bridge group” with concerns about media and pornography, while WAP equated violence and pornography. Bronstein tracks how the “movement transitioned from a broad concern with sexually violent images in popular media to a focus on pornography, which included sexually explicit images that did not feature overt violence” (2011b).

the fact that the anti-pornography movement was in fact highly attacked (Russell 1993, p.8).<sup>85</sup>

Some saw it a white concern,

We were perfectly happy to, you know, look at pornography (laughs), to get off on it and, you know, to understand that there was a real difference between the objectification and abuse, sexual abuse of women as we understood it. So for us, you know, what was much more real and interesting and impactful was to figure out what could we do about the sex trade in South Asia and other parts of the world where women and young girls were being treated with such utter, horrible abuse, and that was much more meaningful to us than whether or not people wore dresses or pants or — you know, and what kind of magazines people got off on (Vasquez 2015, pp.62–3).

In her closing address at the Barnard conference in 1982, the activist and writer Amber Hollibaugh asked,

Do we, as feminists, truly believe that pornography is the major issue facing all women at this time? Do we believe that if we managed to wipe it out, many other aspects of our oppression would crumble as well? In the struggle against pornography, are we creating new definitions of sexual sickness and deviance? (Hollibaugh 1989, p.402).

The answer for many feminists was a resounding “no” (including English, Hollibaugh, & Rubin, 1982; F.A.C.T., 1988; Heresies, 1981; Snitow, 1983; Vance, 1984). Hollibaugh observes how “‘Good’ women have always been incensed at smut. Our reaction went far beyond disgust at pornography’s misogyny or racism; we were also shocked at the very idea of explicit sexual imagery”(1989, p.402).

Others made connections between right wing politics and anti-pornography actions. In *Powers of Desire*, published in 1984, the editors critique the anti-pornography movement for coming out of feminist initiatives such as battered women’s shelters and rape crisis centres, but focusing “not on real instances of violence against women but on sexual images the campaign activists considered to evoke violence” (Snitow et al. 1983, p.38). Ellen Willis’ 1979 essay, “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography” (1983, originally published in *The*

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<sup>85</sup> Sometimes these attacks even came from within: a founding member of WAVAW was so frustrated about WAVAW’s direction by 1983 that she became involved in Women on the Sexual Fringe, and called for a meeting to discuss WAVAW’s critique of SM (Bronstein 2011a, p.287).

*Village Voice* October and November 1979) is one of the first feminist pieces criticising SM.<sup>86</sup> In 1981 she reviewed two key anti-pornography texts, Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) and Susan Griffin's (1981) *Pornography and Silence*. She asks,

Who would have predicted that just now, when the far right has launched an all-out attack on women's basic civil rights, the issue eliciting the most passionate public outrage from feminists should be not abortion, not 'pro-family' fundamentalism, but pornography? (Willis 1981).

Willis deftly outlines how the arguments of the anti-pornography feminists sometimes sound hauntingly familiar to the Right's anti-feminist discourse. She suggests that perhaps it is the anti-pornography feminists who are being influenced by the Right and are "are unconsciously moving with the cultural tide", rather than the pro-sex ones who are so often accused of being in unconscious cahoots with patriarchy (Willis 1981).<sup>87</sup> These feminists' concerns about the similarities between right wing and anti-pornography discourses turned out to be well founded, as Whitney Strub outlines in her article about the ways in which anti-porn feminism and recourse to obscenity laws actually has helped enable censorship of lesbian eroticism (Strub 2010).

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<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the term "pro-sex feminism" is thought to come from Willis' 1981 piece "Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?" (Willis 2005).

<sup>87</sup> A collective concerned with the right wing impacts of anti-pornography actions known as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (F.A.C.T.) was founded in response in 1985 (including members Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter, Carole Vance and Ann Snitow) and were loud and public voices against Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's anti-porn ordinances, including preparing an amicus brief against it. The first was in Minnesota in 1983, but later were taken up in other states and their legality was fought out during the rest of the decade. See Russo for an outline of these measures (1987), or Dworkin and McKinnon in their own words (Dworkin & McKinnon 1988).



**Figure 14** October 20, 1979, a march organised by Women Against Pornography (WAP). They represented a group entitled “Lesbians Against Pornography” (AP 1979).

It is these anti-pornography rather than specifically anti-SM debates that take up most of the space in writings about the sex wars. The two are not entirely separate; SM was inextricably bound up in the struggle, but I will untangle the specificities for SM experience.<sup>88</sup>

It was within this climate of anti-pornography feminism (with roots in second wave feminism and lesbian feminism, who had their own criteria for inclusion and notions of how

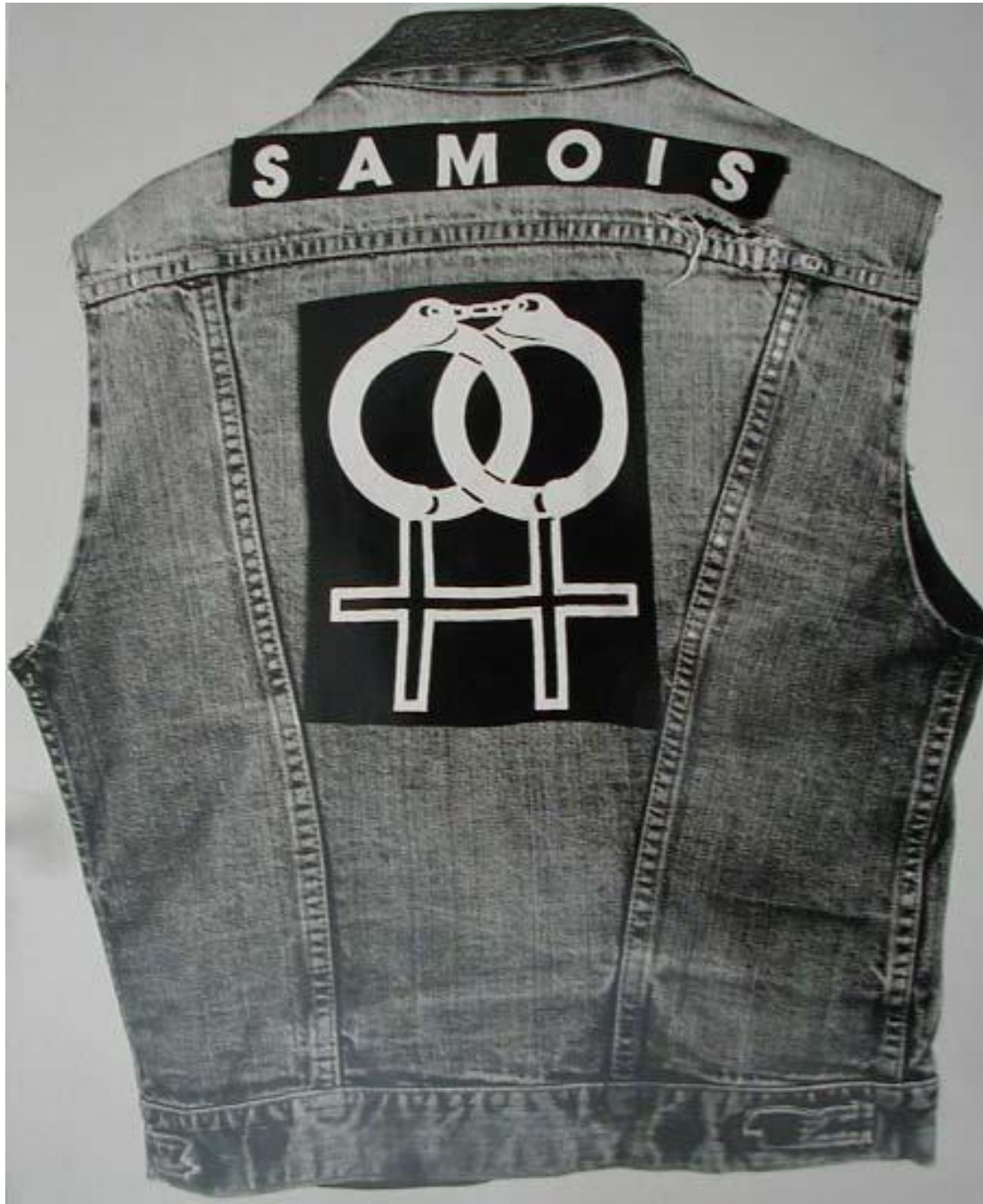
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<sup>88</sup> Pornography became homologous with violence because it was considered a product of the masculine subject; SM became analogous in its acting out bad politics, much like a porn actor or sex worker was acting out patriarchal violence or representing it. As Warner reminds us, McKinnon and Dworkin’s definition of pornography included SM (2011, p.197); and as Rubin points out, the anti-pornography feminists “have condemned virtually every variant of sexual expression as anti-feminist” and have frequently used SM images out of context in their slideshows to shock and appal (Rubin 1984, p.301).

to be a 100% anti-patriarchal feminist), as well as right wing politics, that the issue of lesbian SM (and the subsequent debates) emerged, as I will discuss in chapter 3.

## Chapter 3

### Lesbian Sadomasochism in Public



**Figure 15** A denim vest with Samois' logo – wearing one's “off limits” sexual desires on one's back. Their symbol takes the woman's sign (taken from the women's movement) and the handcuffs from the SM world and brings them together to represent feminist sadomasochism (Rubin, 2004, p. 3).

In 1982, American feminist magazine *Ms* reported on the “Sex Crisis” (not yet a war): “in 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” (Ehrenreich et al. 1982, p.61). However, the *Ms* writers go on to confess, “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 unthinkable off limits. One activist, Pat Califia, identified herself as a sado-masochist...” (Ehrenreich et al. 1982). Not only do we see the already noted convergence of “fundamentalist” and “feminist” control of sex, but also, in the same breath as celebrating women’s daring to express their own eroticism, these feminists are shocked by Califia’s “off limits” desires as a sadomasochist (see Figure 15). Those with “off limits” desires have faced censure and lasting personal impact by claiming their unconventional pleasures in public. The pleasures and the dangers of speaking openly about sex even in a feminist context are all too visible.

In this chapter, I attempt to pinpoint two historical moments.<sup>89</sup> First, I very briefly chart the stirrings of a nascent lesbian SM presence in public life on the West coast from 1975 onwards, and parallels on the opposite coast.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, I write at length about one of the most explosive events in the history of the feminist movement, the 1982 Barnard Conference, with particular attention to the ways SM was mobilised to attack and smear feminists that disagreed with anti-pornography crusaders.

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<sup>89</sup> The sex wars of the 1980s did not appear out of nowhere. Indeed, as sex war scholar Nan Hunter points out, “arguments about the politics of sexuality began in the first wave of feminism and have not ended yet”, and an entire chapter of Hunter and Duggan’s book is dedicated to a timeline of events from 1966 onwards (2006, p.15). This chapter is based on a combination of both my own archival research with primary sources, especially from the Dorothy Allison Papers and newspaper and magazine clippings from the sadomasochism files at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, June Mazer Lesbian Archives, and the ONE Gay and Lesbian Archive, as well as consulting secondary sources that deal with the period.

<sup>90</sup> Like the rest of my thesis, unfortunately it largely ignores SM organising happening outside major, coastal cities. More thorough archival research and oral histories are needed.

### 3.1 The emergence of lesbian SM as a contested notion

#### 3.1.1 SM and the origins of the sex wars

It's an all-too-common narrative to hear that the sex wars began with New York's Barnard Conference (Martindale 1997; McBride 2008; Ferguson et al. 1984).<sup>91</sup> Whether this is because the volume that came out of the conference became such a feminist classic and overshadowed other events, or whether it is because the archival material has remained largely untouched, or because the lack of attention to SM means its early skirmishes are not counted, I could not say.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, I wish to claim here: it all began on the West coast.<sup>93</sup> By "it" I mean what has become known as the feminist "sex wars" of the 1980s which in which SM played a starring role.<sup>94</sup> "Indeed there was a time when discussions about the possibility of feminist SM were largely respectful and inquisitive," says Warner, even if "the women's movement of the sixties and early seventies was a hostile environment for sadomasochistic women" (Califia 1982, p.243), but this was a honeymoon period that did not

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<sup>91</sup> One aspect of the Barnard conference and the sex wars in general that I would have liked to have delved deeper into but was hindered by lack of material was its racial politics. The following statements come from oral histories; it is through this medium that the topic could be more fully explored. Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga thought of it as a white northeastern US debate. Carmen Vasquez agreed, although as the director of the Women's Building in San Francisco, she remembered being embroiled in the sex wars, but not on a personal level (Vasquez 2015, p.62). Moraga told Kelly Anderson in an oral history that "honestly, I feel like it was a white women's thing. I mean, I felt, the Barnard conference was really a white on white conversation." (Moraga 2005, p.61). Allison disagrees but says that "But at the same time, she's right about how she got played and pulled in, and that was really hard to confront and see that, in fact....The sex wars is not just a white issue, although some of the ways we fought it were" (Allison 2007, p.51).

<sup>92</sup> As I explain below, the Barnard conference was such an intense experience for its participants that it is unsurprising they would be relatively blinded to other events. Vance writes in the *Pleasure and Danger* that "for many feminists on the East coast, the Barnard conference signalled the beginning of the "sex wars", (Vance 1989, p.xxii) noting only in a footnote (!) that "in fact, the opening salvos of the sex wars occurred in San Francisco as early as 1977-9", directing us to Califia's historical chapter in *Coming to Power* (Califia 1982). She thanks conversations with Gayle Rubin on this topic, and indeed it reads all a bit like an afterthought to make the west/east coast distinction for her (Vance 1989, p.xxxvii).

<sup>93</sup> Bronstein, a scholar of anti-pornography feminism, also makes this claim – it's clearer in this case because these groups began on the west coast (Bronstein 2011b).

<sup>94</sup> I do not wish to claim, however, that there was no conflict about sex and sexuality before what I am claiming is the "beginning" of the sex wars; but rather it was not and is not described in this way. So I refer only to the specific historical phenomenon known as the sex wars.



last (Warner 2011, p.4).<sup>95</sup> The year 1975 seems to be the year when sadomasochism as a lesbian and feminist topic began to gain traction with the publication of the first article about lesbianism, feminism and SM in *Hera*, reprinted for a larger audience two years later in *Lesbian Tide*.<sup>96</sup> This visibility helped others recognise and name SM desires within themselves, and seek out or establish their own specifically lesbian SM groups.<sup>97</sup> We see here how lesbian and sadomasochist are two intertwined identities which sometimes seem to contradict each other.

Action happened on the streets too. After some skirmishes with protests by anti-violence groups, SM lesbians struck back against a WAVPM forum at the University of California, Berkeley in 1980. They picketed the event with signs emblazoned with “This Forum is a Lie About S/M” (Califia 1982, p.259).<sup>98</sup> A foreshadowing of what was to come at Barnard two years later...

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<sup>95</sup> Various publications published texts around feminism, SM and lesbianism in the late 1970s. Pat Califia’s account of this timeline is detailed and so for reasons of space I have not included a broken down timeline and analysis of pre-1982 writings on and expressions of lesbian SM (See Califia 1982).

<sup>96</sup> This was article by Barbara Ruth (aka Barbara Lipschutz aka Drivenwoman), “Cathexis (on the nature of S&M)”, a public declaration of her feminism and masochism (1975). According to Califia (who was already historicising the movement in 1981!), this moment of confession was so intense for Ruth because for the first time, “women in the movement were not confronting sadomasochists as literary figures or psychiatric case histories” - one of their own was expressing these desires (Califia 1982, p.244). “We [lesbian sadomasochists] were real women-sisters-who were being vulnerable, describing our sexuality to a sceptical and hostile audience” (Califia 1982, p.244). As Warner points out, its publication in neither led to a barrage of letters to the editor suggesting that the issue was not so red hot at this time as it was later, although it did come at “high personal cost” to Ruth suggesting that while people might not be outraged enough to write letters, they could be disapproving or disgusted enough to shun Ruth in person (Califia 1982, p.244). At any rate the levels of controversy are far below what was to come (see 3.2).

<sup>97</sup> Heterosexual and women’s SM groups had existed before, however, such as Cardea in San Francisco.

<sup>98</sup> Califia (1982, p.259) explains these happenings in much more detail than I have space for here.

**FORUM:**

# **FEMINISM and SADOMASOCHISM**

**SUNDAY  
SEPT. 25, 7:30pm**

**AT:** **BETH CHAYIM CHADASHIM**  
a reform congregation  
6000 West Pico Blvd. • Los Angeles, CA 90035

**#3 Suggested Donation  
Open To The Public**

Sadomasochism, or S&M is a consensual minority sexual practice. Sadomasochists achieve sexual pleasure by fantasizing and/or acting out dominant or submissive roles. There has been a great deal of controversy within the women's liberation movement around the issue of S&M. Many of us are confused. Some of us have mixed feelings. Those of us who are out about our S&M practices, or who have stood up for the rights of sadomasochists, or who have wanted to open up nonjudgemental discussion on the subject have been shut down and publicly condemned. What does it all mean? Why such an extreme reaction from within the women's movement? How do we analyze the issues as feminists? As sexual minorities? As working women who provide professional services to sadomasochists?

**SPEAKERS INCLUDE:**

- \*Suzann Gage, coordinator of Women On the Sexual Fringe, a feminist rap group on sex and sexuality.
- \*A representative from Leather and Lace LA, a lesbian oriented S&M support group
- \*A representative from the U.S. Prostitutes Collective, part of an international network of working women

For information on childcare and wheel chair access please leave a message for Suzann at 469-4844. Forum sponsored by Women On the Sexual Fringe- WOSF

**Figure 16** An example of the kind of public events that were organised by feminists to discuss SM. Date unknown (probably early to mid-1980s), sponsored by Women On the Sexual Fringe (WOSF), a support group for women of any sexual orientation or identity in Los Angeles (ONE sadomasochism file).

### **3.1.2 Lesbian SM on the East coast**

On October 16, 1981, the Lesbian Herstory Archives (a lesbian archive in New York City) hosted a discussion on "Censorship, Pornography, and Sexuality" with "speakers from

women against pornography and SM feminists” (Kritzman & Vance 1981, p.1, Allison Papers, Box 21).<sup>99</sup> The 1982 Barnard Conference Planning Committee included the details in their minutes. In the next planning meeting, the Barnard Planning Committee heard from members who had attended the uneventful and diverse panel.<sup>100</sup> They note that a “wide variety of women” attended the discussion, “women concerned about violence and pornography, lesbians involved in SM, feminist pornographers and others”<sup>101</sup> (Janie Kritzman & Vance 1981a, pp.3–4, Allison Papers, Box 21). With such an event going off without a hitch, it is understandable that the conference organisers would not have expected the intense reactions at the conference only a few months later.

In the same year, the Heresies collective published their innovative sex issue (see Figure 17), including Pat Califia’s “Feminism and Sado-masochism”, and the issue was on the reading lists of the Barnard committee as inspirational work they wanted to follow (Heresies Collective 1981).<sup>102</sup> Yet, only one year earlier in 1980, NOW had declared its official opposition to lesbian SM, the ultimate sign that the feminist establishment would have none of it (Wright 2006, p.220).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, the minutes note that Califia and Rubin, “due to a change of plans” would not be present. I am unsure if this is because these were two SM feminists involved in the Planning Committee and thus it was of relevance to others who knew them, or if it was because these two had become the faces of the SM feminist movement, or both.

<sup>100</sup> Ann Snitow, Frances Doughty, Esther Newton, and Carol Vance attended. In their minutes the Planning Committee describes how in the event participants were asking questions about breaking taboos, being a “sexual outlaw”, taking symbols out of context as well as the role of Right and Left politics in the feminist movement.

<sup>101</sup> Feminist pornography was already being made at this time (i.e. by Betty Dodson), yet the anti-pornography movement was not engaging with it, instead using the worst and most shocking examples of mainstream porn in their educational slideshows, presenting only one kind of pornography to represent the entire genre.

<sup>102</sup> See *The Heretics*, a documentary about *Heresies*, for more on its impact (Braderman 2009).

<sup>103</sup> Also included on NOW’s blacklist was pederasty, pornography, and public sex (Wright 2006, p.220).

# SEX ISSUE

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

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Cover fragments taken from "Blue Confessions: A Fantasy" by Martha Balsam.

Figure 17 The contents page of *Heresies' Sex Issue* shows a diversity of topics.

## 3.2 The "Barnard Conference", 1982

But on April 24, 1982, Barnard's ninth annual Scholar and Feminist conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" ("The Barnard Conference", or, as Dorothy Allison and her friends

called it, the “Barnard Sex Scandal” (1994, p.102)) lived up to its name in certain, unexpected respects. It “marked the official outbreak of the sex wars”, claims Martindale – but I would add, on the East coast at least (see 3.1) (1997, p.5). The Barnard conference was an attempt at foregrounding sexuality from a feminist perspective in a political environment where the feminist gains of the past decades were seriously under attack, but anti-pornography feminists were gaining most of the media spotlight. The organisers wrote in their planning meeting minutes, “the right wing has proposed a comprehensive theory of sexuality and the feminist response has been lacking” (Janie Kritzman & Vance 1981, p.3, Allison Papers, Box 21). In contrast to the caricatured viewpoints attributed to them, these thinkers were attempting to take into account both the pleasure *and* the danger of female sexuality, but what emerged was a highly slanted view of the conference and a bona fide moral panic (Vance 1984, p.1).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Vance writes in great detail in the revised introduction of *Pleasure and Danger*, which she calls “More Pleasure, More Danger: A Decade after the Barnard Sexuality Conference” to emphasise how many “pro-sex” feminists resented the name and the implications, because many of them agreed, for example, that some pornography was violence and degrading, but refused to take the stand of anti-pornography activists. She says some even called themselves “anti- anti-pornography feminists) (1989, p.xxiii). Furthermore, the tactics by the pro-sex movement differed from the anti-porn folks: they always were open to debate, refused to declare anyone “anti-feminist”.



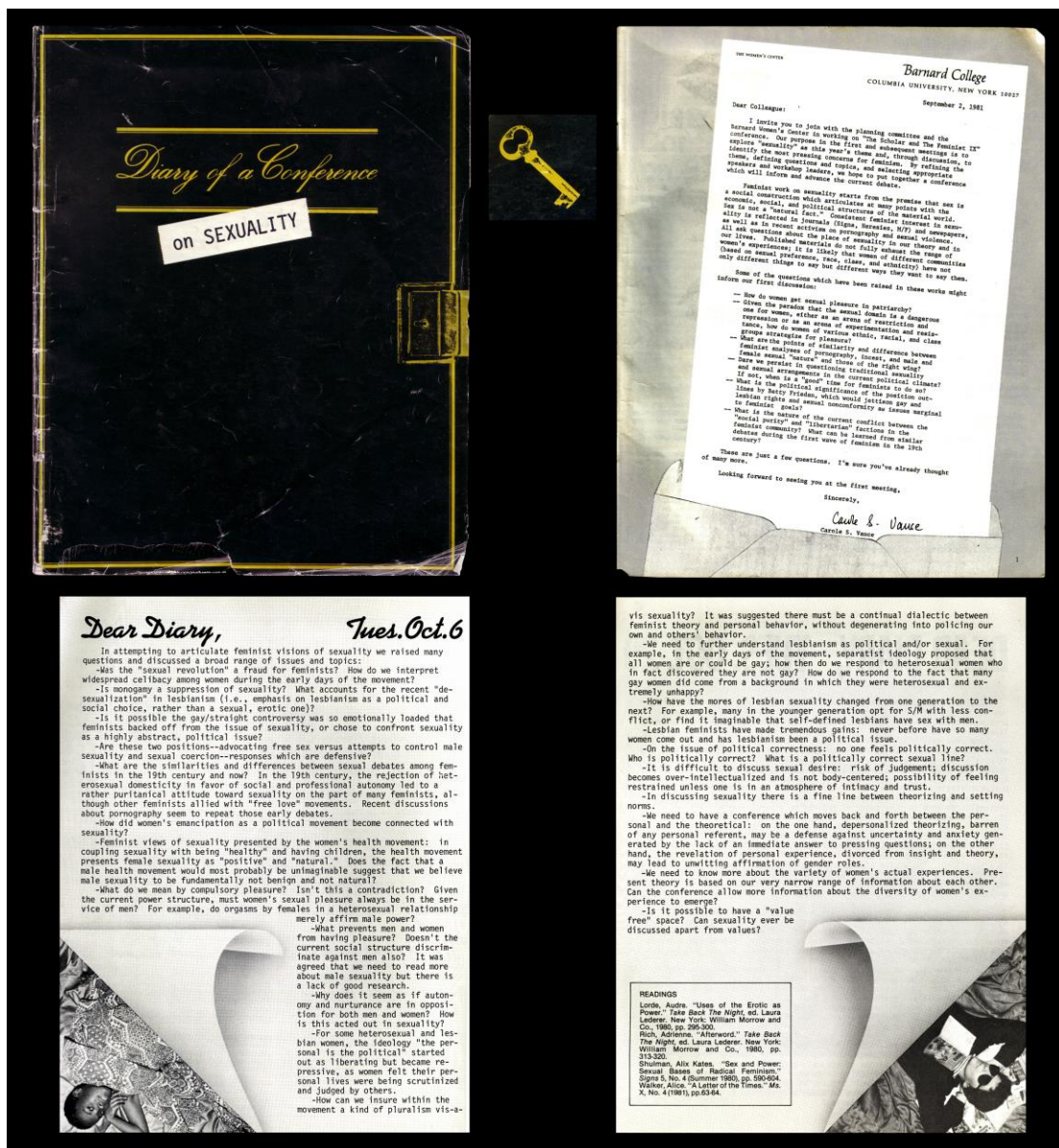


Figure 18 Some images from the 1982 conference diary - cover, intro letter and excerpt pp. 10-11 (Ellen Dubois' donation, Jewish Women's Archive (Jewish Women's Archive n.d.).

The conference was organised by scholar Carol Vance and a planning committee consisting of faculty and graduate students from Barnard and Columbia, as well as New York "feminists and intellectuals", assembled through an open call for organizers (Rubin 2011a, p.20). Invitations were sent to similarly a large and assumedly diverse group: the entire

Barnard faculty, previous organizers of the Scholar and Feminist conference, academics and activists working on sexuality.<sup>105</sup>



**Figure 19 Joan Nestle, Deborah Edel and group, “Gathering at LHA/Joan Nestle’s apartment the weekend of the Barnard Conference” (Morgan Grenwald Collection, LHA).**

The planning committee (which doubled as a study group on sexuality) spent months organising the conference from September 1981-April 1982 (see Figure 19), a process well documented in letters and minutes (see Figure 20). They intended to publish a sort of do-it-yourself (DIY) conference diary, designed by Meryl Altman that would be distributed to all participants, acting as a record of the planning process and the event itself.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>105</sup> I emphasize this here because anti-sex critics of the conference would claim that their voices were deliberating excluded (see Figure 22 and Figure 23).

<sup>106</sup> The Diary included the invitational letter (p.1), handwritten notes (pp.9,25,41,71-2), minutes of the Planning Committee (p.4-34), observations and handwritten notes dotted about (and lipstick kisses!), workshop descriptions, reading lists with pictures from the speakers,<sup>106</sup> (pp.44-46), the conference’s concept paper (pp.38-40) as well as including space for one’s own notes during the conference (pp. 43, 48, 49, 54-5, 60-1, 69-70) and a specific section to collect phone numbers (p.73) (see Figure 18). Information was conveyed in the form of diary entries and personal ads (like Hattie Gossett’s p.68), plus collaged pictures, all in black and white.

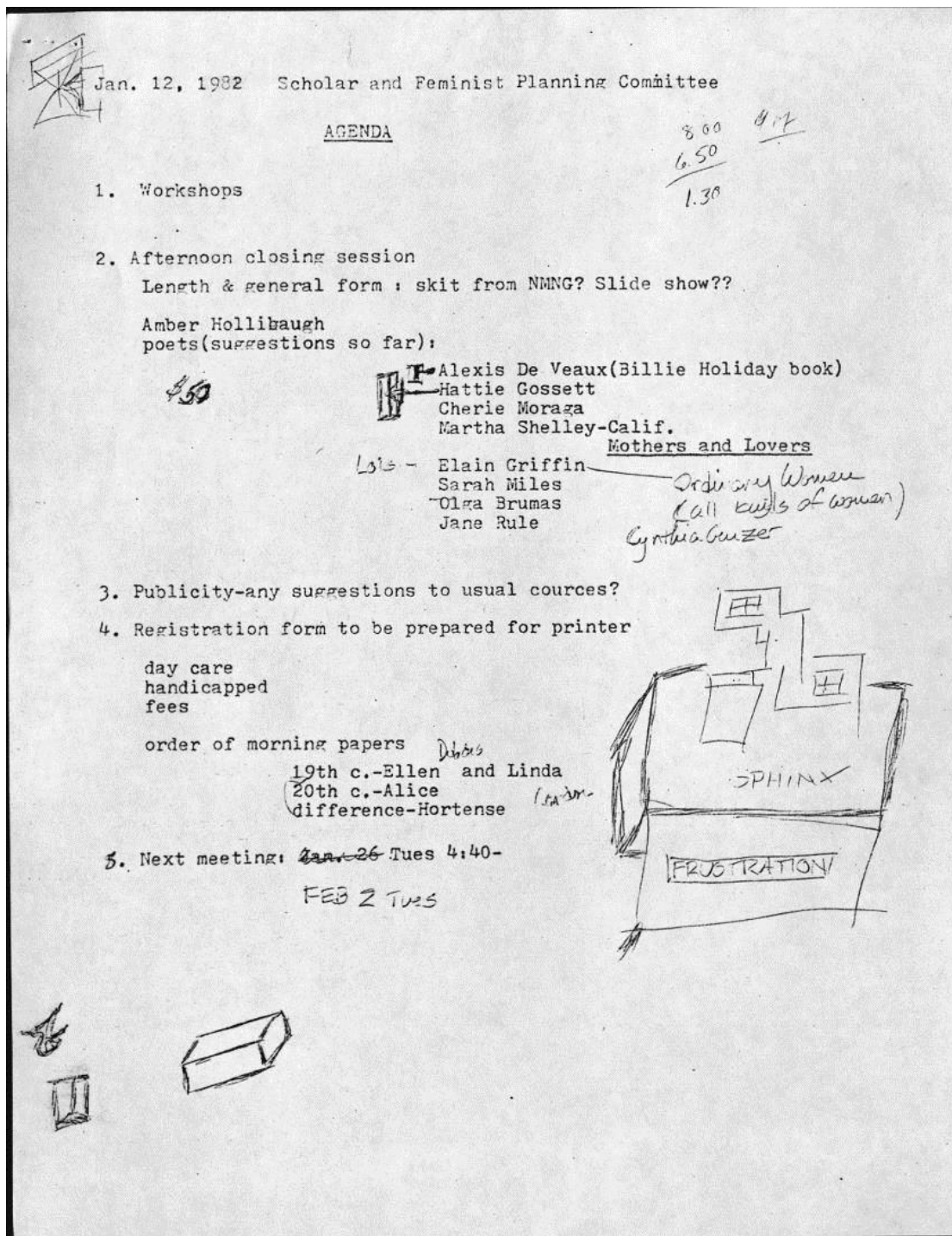


Figure 20 Dorothy Allison's copy of a page from the minutes of the January 12, 1982 meeting (Allison Papers, Box 21). She was a member of the planning meeting but only attended a few meetings.

But this innovative "Diary of a Conference on Sexuality" (see Figure 21) as it was called, did not have a simple journey. Even before the conference started it had to be



reprinted, an omen of what was to come.<sup>107</sup> The Barnard College administration who had supported the conference in its long planning stage, alerted by the anti-pornography movement, panicked less than 24 hours before the conference and attempted to confiscate the diary because it contained their letterhead on the invitation and some pictures within were deemed “offensive”, before agreeing to reprint it without a trace of Barnard. “In other words, the College effectively paid thousands of dollars to have Barnard's name taken off of the document, thus removing the College's connection to this important body of work”, observes the current director of the Barnard Center for Research on Women in the conference’s thirtieth incarnation (Jakobsen 2005).<sup>108</sup> Such was the anxiety caused by this ground-breaking conference that subverted the mainstream discourses about sex and women’s sexuality. Even a university who ran a feminist conference for almost ten years was made to panic about the impact of this theme because of anti-pornography groups’ extremist rhetoric. This was a surprise to the Center for Research on Women’s director, Jane Gould: “I thought it would be controversial but I had no idea how controversial it would turn out to be [...] it was very exciting, but scary” (Haimowitz 2005).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Despite this being such an important document for the feminist movement, none of the archives I went to had a copy! I was able to access its contents both from Heather Love’s article specifically about the diary (2011), and a scanned version is now available online (<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/34477856/diary-of-a-conference-on-sexuality-dark-matter-archives>), plus I used high-quality scans from the Jewish Women’s Archive to include here.

<sup>108</sup> Vance’s epilogue in *Pleasure and Danger* outlines all the details before, during and after the conference (Vance 1989, pp.431–439).

<sup>109</sup> Jakobsen’s (2005) speech is was reflecting on thirty years of the conferences; Haimowitz (2005) made a documentary to commemorate this event too.

I've been interested in the history and theory of sexuality for a long time, but was afraid to speak or write publicly on the issue. I was afraid of inadvertently exposing myself and/or appearing ridiculous, and this shut me up. I assume similar fears have shut other women up, although it certainly hasn't stopped men, who have been pronouncing on sexuality for years. Anyhow, being a member of the planning committee helped me to get over that fear and I hope that the conference does the same for women who participate in it. Once we start talking and thinking seriously about sexuality, women -- feminists -- will make great breakthroughs, I'm sure.

Ellen DuBois

I want to acknowledge insecurity as well as pleasure: the persistence of a grade school self that groups of women still bring out in me: the little girl who wonders who is best friends with whom, who's terrified of being left out. Talking about sex, if not false, is intimate. It turned me inside out at times.

Kate Ellis

Why this conference on sexuality? Because it asks us to look at the uncomfortable questions surrounding the issue. Most feminists in the N.Y. area support reproductive freedom. There is no controversy when CARASA draws the parallel between the struggle of White middle class women for abortion rights and the campaign of working class Blacks and Hispanics against sterilization abuse. Even the right to be lesbian (sorry Betty F.) is taken for granted. But when we talk about the possibilities for sexual pleasure under Patriarchy many of us, myself included, get nervous. While some of the most exciting theoretical work engaged in today explores this question, we still have no common vocabulary, no common commitment to the political importance of fulfilling our private desires. If not ready to resolve the problem, at least we will have the chance to reflect on the ways women have defined and experienced eroticism. When have we insisted on sexual freedom and when have we sacrificed it for other ends?--Judith Friedlander

Late at night in Fargo, N.D., ten degrees below zero outside, a farmer just jump-started my rental car, the "pro-life" women I spent the day with are all at home tending families. I summon up a split-screen in my mind. On one side, the Right-to-Life meeting I just attended at the Evangelical Free Church, on the other the last planning committee meeting I attended at Barnard and I wonder, "How can two groups of American women get together and have such different conversations about sex?".

Faye Ginsburg

It is exhilarating to look back over the past decade and note the changes in feminist thought and scholarly inquiry that make this conference possible. Each year we pride ourselves in selecting a theme for our annual Scholar and Feminist conference which is on the cutting edge of feminist scholarship. This may be a special moment in history, a feminist conference on sexuality which could not have been held ten years ago and may not have the same urgency or import five years hence.

Jane Gould

Figure 21 Page 25 of the diary, with contributions from Ellen DuBois, Kate Ellis, Judith Friedlander, Faye Ginsberg and Jane Gould. Note how DuBois credits the planning committee with helping her overcome her fears of speaking about sex in public, but both she and Friedlander specifically, and everyone implicitly, draw attention to the anxiety of speaking freely about sexual pleasure in that climate. Also note the slight dig at Betty Friedan's homophobia from Friedlander.

The drama did not end with the diary's confiscation and reprint. Conference goers were met at the entrance with picketing anti-pornography feminists from Women Against

Pornography, (and at least in name, Women Against Violence Against Women, and New York Radical Feminists),<sup>110</sup> under the banner of a newly formed “Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality Against Sadomasochism”, wearing tee shirts reading “For Feminist Sexuality” on one side and “Against S/M” on the other (see Figures 23, 24, 25). Amber Hollibaugh remembers with obvious pain, “having to cross a picket line of women who said that we were not feminists, and that we were betrayers. We were the enemies of our own movement” (Haimowitz 2005).

WAP also distributed 2-page leaflets (henceforth “the leaflet”) that detailed the alleged (and not always correct)<sup>111</sup> sexual proclivities and political sympathies of certain conference participants and claiming the conference was promoting “anti-feminist sexuality”, (see Figure 22, Figure 23) (Vance 1989, p.xxi). In a open protest letter, over 300 scholars called this a naming and shaming a “McCarthyite act” that seriously impacted its targets’ (victims’?) lives (Abelove et al. 1982, p.26).<sup>112</sup> Hester Eisenstein, a speaker, has called it “a violent moment” in the conference’s history (Haimowitz 2005).

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<sup>110</sup> Califia suggests it was actually all the brainchild of Dorchen Leidhardt and Elizabeth Dworn of WAP. California based WAVAW did not read the pamphlet before signing it (nor agree to naming and shaming individuals), and the New York Radical Feminists had supposedly been inactive for years by this point (Califia 1983b, p.594).

<sup>111</sup> To give one example, No More Nice Girls, accused in the leaflet of “contend[ing] pornography is liberating”, is actually an anti-abortion group with no official view on pornography. One of their founders (who is also misrepresented as their only founder), Ellen Willis, was a vocal opponent of anti-pornography feminism, and the leaflet writers used her own personal opinions to discredit and important feminist organisation she was associated with (Willis 1983). Dirty tactics indeed, and a classic sex panic example, as Janice Irvine explains, a “courtesy stigma” of being involved in some way with pro-sex politics (Irvine 2008, p.20).

<sup>112</sup> The impact for the five women named was huge – personally, professionally academically – it was a serious act to be labelled a sexual pervert in such conservative times (Vance 1989, p.xxi; Vance 1983). Dorothy Allison’s amazing chronicle of the aftermath, “Public Silence, Private Terror” is in her collection, *Skin* (Allison 1994). Allison recounts numerous late night confessional phone calls from women she barely knew; it illustrates the desperation of some women who knew they felt “incorrect” desires, but needed to speak about them so badly they would call a near stranger. It is examples like these which show that the importance of this public discourse cannot be understated.

# We Protest

We are a coalition of radical feminists and lesbian feminists who have joined together to protest this conference's promotion of one perspective on sexuality and its silencing of the views of a major portion of the feminist movement. Although we have great respect for the tradition of "The Scholar and the Feminist" and the achievements of the Barnard women's center, we believe that this conference is undermining that record by endorsing a tiny offshoot of the women's movement that is part of the backlash against radical feminism.

Represented at this conference are organizations that support and produce pornography, that promote sex roles and sadomasochism, and that have joined the straight and gay pedophile organizations in lobbying for an end to laws that protect children from sexual abuse by adults. Excluded from this conference are feminists who have developed the feminist analysis of sexual violence, who have organized a mass movement against pornography, who have fought media images that legitimize sexual violence, who believe that sadomasochism is reactionary, patriarchal sexuality, and who have worked to end the sexual abuse of children.

Among the organizations represented here today are the following:

\*No More Nice Girls, a group of women writers who publish in the Village Voice and contend that pornography is liberating. No More Nice Girls believes that instead of challenging a six-billion-dollar-a-year industry that traffics in women's bodies, feminists should simply make their own pornography. Represented today by Brett Harvey, No More Nice Girls was founded by Voice columnist Ellen Willis, who has been an influential member of this conference's planning committee.

\*Samois, a San Francisco-based organization of lesbian sadomasochists named after a house of torture in The Story of O and represented today by one of its founders, Gayle Rubin. Samois condemns feminists as "prudes" and "moralists" and celebrates sadomasochists as "sexual radicals" and "sexual outlaws." This rhetoric conceals a sexual politics of dominance and submission (sexual partners are "masters and slaves" and "tops and bottoms"), force, and sexual scenarios of humiliation and violence, ranging from calling one's sexual partner dehumanizing, misogynistic names like "bitch," "whore," and "cunt," to "fistfucking," bondage, whipping, cutting with razor blades, dripping hot wax onto flesh, attaching clamps to nipples and labia, and piercing nipples and labia. (Instructions for all of these sexual practices are detailed in Samois' most recent publication, Coming to Power.) The members of Samois use and promote commercial pornography, have published in pornography magazines (an article by Samois member Pat Califia recently appeared in Penthouse's Variations), and make their own pornography, so closely modeled on heterosexual pornography that it is indistinguishable from it. Samois has endorsed the stand of NAMBLA (Nat'l Man-Boy Love Association) against laws that prohibit adults from sexually abusing children.

over...

Figure 22 WAP's infamous leaflet distributed at Barnard in 1982 (Allison Papers, Box 21).

\*The Lesbian Sex Mafia, Samois' New York City counterpart, recently founded by workshop leader, Dorothy Allison. This group is known for its aboveground demonstrations of S&M paraphernalia and its underground demonstrations of bondage, flagellation, and "fist-fucking." On Sunday this group is holding a "speakout" on "politically incorrect sexuality" (a codeword for sadomasochistic sexuality), advertised in *Off Our Backs* and *WomanNews* as being held in conjunction with this Barnard conference.

\*Also among the speakers and workshop leaders are several individual women who champion butch-femme sex roles, while denying that these roles have any relation to the male-female sex roles that are the psychological foundation of patriarchy. One of these women has been selected to give the closing address. Most of them have given public support to Samois.

For all of their claims of radicalism, all of the organizations and individuals listed above are advocating the same kind of patriarchal sexuality that flourishes in our culture's mainstream, that is channeled into crimes of sexual violence against women, and that is institutionalized in pornography. The lesbian sadomasochists go so far as to imitate and mock the historical patriarchal atrocities of the slavery of Blacks, the Nazi's genocide of Jews, the persecution of homosexuals, and the sexual slavery of women. Pat Califia approvingly writes, "An S/M scene can be played out using the personae of ... Nazi and Jew, white and Black, straight man and queer ... whore and client." This glorification of dominance and submission carried to the point of explicit violence and degradation of minorities is nothing less than sexual fascism.

This coalition is not criticizing any women for having internalized sex roles, for having sadomasochistic fantasies, or for becoming sexually aroused by pornography. We acknowledge that all people who have been socialized in a patriarchal society--feminists and nonfeminists, lesbians and heterosexuals--have internalized its sexual patterns of dominance and submission. But No More Nice Girls, Samois, The Lesbian Sex Mafia, and the butch-femme proponents are not acknowledging having internalized patriarchal messages and values. Instead, they are denying that these values are patriarchal. And even more dangerous, they are actively promoting these values through their public advocacy of pornography, sex roles, and sadomasochism and their insistence that this kind of sexuality means liberation for women.

We feel strongly that feminists must continue to analyze oppressive sexual institutions and values as we put forth a sexual politics founded on equality, creativity, and respect for female bodies and eroticism. We are dismayed and saddened that instead 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.

COALITION FOR A FEMINIST SEXUALITY AND AGAINST SADOMASOCHISM

Women Against Violence Against Women  
Women Against Pornography  
New York Radical Feminists

Figure 23 The second page of WAP's leaflet (Allison Papers, Box 21).

This leaflet took particular care to smear conference presenters who were involved in (or thought to be involved in) pro-pornography or SM activities. Most notably for my study,

both Gayle Rubin, LSM (and thus Dorothy Allison, its founder, although she herself is not mentioned by name) were attacked. Pat Califia and Amber Hollibaugh were not, but nevertheless so clearly identifiable “that not naming them was equally damaging”, as conference organiser and activist Frances Doughty wrote to *off our backs* (Doughty 1982, p.26).

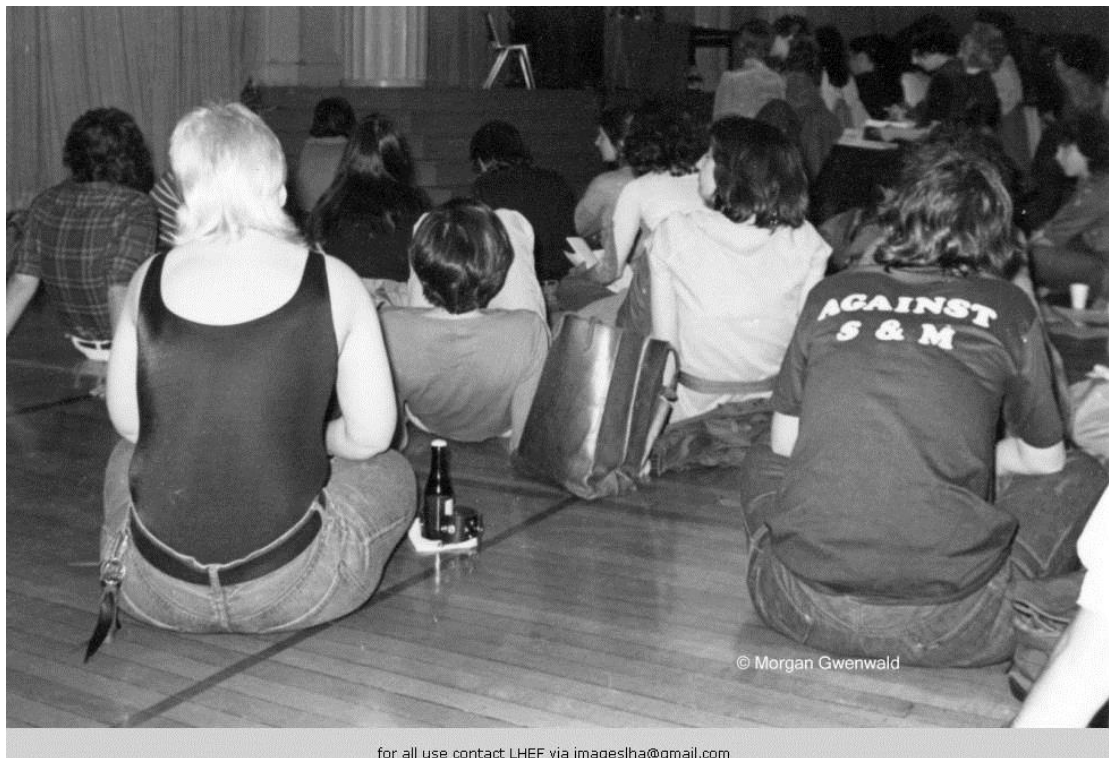


**Figure 24 WAP protester outside Barnard. We can see a pile of extra tee shirts on the table – I wonder if anyone took one (Morgan Gwenwald Collection, LHA).**





**Figure 25 WAP ambushing Barnard's gates on both sides. From the pictures, at least it looks like a relatively small group of picketers (Morgan Gwenwald Collection, LHA).**



**Figure 26 Wearing one's convictions on one's back (Morgan Gwenwald Collection, LHA).**

Both the leaflet and the picket framed the conference in a certain, misleading way, with SM taking centre stage before it even began. Carol Vance, writing in *Pleasure and Danger*, points out how the panels and sessions represented a diverse range of political views and themes, from body image to abortion to psychoanalysis to taboo and much more (1984, p.xx).<sup>113</sup> She observed, “the leaflet gave birth to a phantom conference [a phase she also used in 1984], devoted to three issues: sado-masochism, pornography, and butch-femme roles” (1989, p.xx). Rubin suggests that the protesters were “outraged by the conference, or *what they imagined it to be*” (2011, p. 21, emphasis mine). Firstly, WAP’s critiques of sadomasochism, butch/femme roles, pornography and sex work were misplaced.<sup>114</sup> Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” was the sole presentation at the conference dealing explicitly with SM. Even so, SM is only one part of her larger, complex argument. There was, however, a women’s SM party happening in NYC at the same time, but unrelated to the conference (Weiss n.d., p.260).

In particular WAP’s choice to highlight SM on their specially printed shirts rather than some other perceived evil is perplexing. Califia reported that WAP’s lies extended well beyond the leaflet, describing the conference to at least one feminist group, Lesbian Feminist

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<sup>113</sup> It turned out to be the only conference publication that had not been affiliated with Barnard/Columbia as like the Diary, they did not want to their name associated with the conference.

<sup>114</sup> Although it is certainly true that in the conference’s first planning meeting on September 16, 1981 Vance introduced the conference’s theme of sexuality stating, “in light of the current controversy about pornography in the feminist community, sexuality is a particularly timely and appropriate topic”, and the recommended reading list came from the influential #12 Sex issue of *Heresies* (See Figure 17) (Heresies Collective 1981), the questions she posed after this framing were diverse and not centred around pornography, let alone SM (Janie Kritzman & Vance 1981c, p.1, Allison Papers, Box 21).



Liberation, as a “conference on sadomasochism” (Califia 1983b, p.594).<sup>115</sup> Willis, a planning committee member, also comments on their misleading tactics writing,

I can attest that the leaflet’s characterization of the conference as a vehicle for promoting pornography, s/m, and butch-femme roles is false and indeed absurd. We did want to include discussion of these controversial subjects and in particular to give feminists 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 (Willis 1983, p.593).<sup>116</sup>

Thus, WAP’s action was based more on personal attacks, and less on substance. Willis writes, “apparently, the writers of the leaflet believe not only that certain opinions should not be heard, but that any woman who has ever expressed such opinions should not be invited to speak at a feminist event *on any subject*” (Willis 1983, p.594).<sup>117</sup>

The leaflet’s inflammatory speech and its responses actually publicised and centralised SM far more than it would have been otherwise, one topic amongst a crowd of other pressing feminist issues. Davis writes how,

in 1981, ‘sadomasochism’ has become a buzz word. It is tacked onto just about anything hated or feared. This, we hear that there have been sadomasochistic eras in

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<sup>115</sup> Califia also perhaps adds fuel to the fire with her tone and language – was she trying to shock? “The ‘facts’ set forth in the leaflet smell like day-old semen/cuntjuice and should be summarily and publically corrected, preferably with a bullwhip. Since public floggings are no longer sanctioned by the state, print will have to suffice” (1983b, p.594). At any rate, the editors of *Feminist Studies* were so regretful for publishing the leaflet that they had no choice but to offer space for the victims to express their own views in whatever manner they chose (the editors’ apology and response is on page 589 of the same issue). Califia includes these comments directly to the managing editor alongside the published piece, which she called “yet another response to those folks in Women Against Pornography who aren’t prudes and moralists but keep acting the way prudes and moralists act” (a title which did not end up being published): “It is all very well and good to generously offer us a chance to respond, but frankly, Claire, I have responded and responded to these assholes in WAP and I’m tired. Do you know how idiotic it makes one feel to repeat over and over and over again, ‘I’m a sadist but I’m not a Nazi’, and try to explain that to folks who are so repelled by the first half of the sentence that they never even hear the second half? No, of course you don’t” (Califia 1983a, p.1, Allison Papers, Box 4).

<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the notes of the Planning Committee indicate their commitment to addressing women in the New Right and anti-pornography feminism – WAP and their tactics are even mentioned by name - within the conference (Janie Kritzman and Carol Vance, Minutes from October 28, 1981 Planning Meeting, pp.3-5, Allison Papers, Box 21). In another meeting, they stated, “we need to know more about the variety of women’s actual experiences. Present theory is based on our very narrow range of information about each other”, and also asked “is it possible to have a ‘value free’ space? Can sexuality ever be discussed apart from values?” (Kritzman & Vance 1981, p.3, Allison Papers, Box 21).

<sup>117</sup> It is without a doubt true, however, that the Planning Committee was made up of many who were openly supportive of SM and other pro-sex issues, whether they practiced them themselves (such as Dorothy Allison), but even so, looking at the programme makes clear that Willis’ claim is completely justified.

history, or that some people have sadomasochistic mentalities which warp them beyond hope (Davis 1981, p.8).

The centrality attributed to SM when most probably the WAP knew that the conference would *not* be centred around what SM, pornography, and butch-femme, what Vance calls the “anti-pornographer’s counterpart to the New Right’s unholy trinity of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” (Vance 1989, p.434). It indicates that WAP believed that SM would attract the most attention and outrage as behaviour truly “beyond the feminist pale”, as the conference supporters’ open letter termed it (Abelove et al. 1982, p.26). As Doughty points out in the letters page of *off our backs*, the result of leafleting and picketing was

both to inflate and shrink the bounds of talking about sexuality. Inflation because any mention of SM (especially in the context of feminism) in particular, but also of pornography or of butch-femme, balloons out to obscure all other discussion – people, stop listening and all other topics disappear. At the same time, discussion of any other aspects of women’s or lesbian sexuality has shrunk to almost nothing (Doughty 1982, p.26).

Ironical for a conference and a speak-out concerned exactly with trying to find a way to talk about sex freely in such a hostile world. Reading the leaflet, Doughty felt “fear, that I too may harbor some unacceptable thought or desire and will be subject to the same treatment” (Ibid). Another arbiter of judgement was added to the mix – not only were there heteronormative cultural norms, but one had to fall in line with a certain type of feminism’s norms or risk public shaming. Thus we see here how using SM as a scare tactic works to shut down conversations more than create them.

This “unholy trinity” view of the conference – SM, porn, and butch-femme – was exacerbated and perpetuated in “hostile publications” like *off our backs* (Vance 1989, pp.xxi–ii), as well as more sympathetic ones like national gay newspaper *Gay Community News* and

the *The Village Voice*.<sup>118</sup> Carla Freccero credits visibility and accessibility of these debates as “exacerbate[ing] and publiciz[ing] deep rifts among feminists” (Freccero 1990, p.310). Even major academic journal *Feminist Studies* entered the fray. They published a petition signed by nearly three hundred people denouncing the actions of WAP and company as trying to stifle debate about sexuality.<sup>119</sup> Part of it reads:

At the conference, a coalition leaflet was distributed which singled out and misrepresented some individual participants. They, and the groups to which they belonged, were attacked by name as morally unacceptable and beyond the feminist pale. The effect was to stigmatize individuals identified with controversial sexual views or practices, such as butch-femme roles, sadomasochism, or criticism of the anti-pornography movement (Abelove et al. 1983, p.179).

The polarisation seen here (implicit or explicit us and them), the fight to police the bounds of feminism (and what is “beyond the feminist pale”), was a clear standpoint that this kind of feminist practice was unacceptable. Ellen DuBois, an academic and presenter at the conference, remembers, “from this point on, feminist approaches to sexuality were complex and multifaceted, and the anti-pornography forces were no longer able to represent themselves as ‘the’ voice of feminism” (Jewish Women’s Archive n.d.).

### 3.3 The Lesbian Sex Mafia and the “Speakout on Politically Incorrect Sex”

In the aftermath, the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM),<sup>120</sup> a lesbian SM group founded the previous year by writer and activist Dorothy Allison, organised a Speakout on Politically Incorrect Sex.<sup>121</sup> I dwell here for a while because I see this event as crucial in the formation of a public

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<sup>118</sup> This was a New York City-based publication with a section that printed opinions, including many of the rising feminist voices of the day (Willis 2005).

<sup>119</sup> This letter was signed by members of Feminist Studies’ editorial board and conference organisers, and also sent to *off our backs*, who published it in 1982 (Letter from Vance to the Editor of *off our backs*, June 14, 1982, Allison Papers, Box 21).

<sup>120</sup> In their own words from 1981, printed in lieu of a response to the leaflet: “The Lesbian Sex Mafia is a support group for women, particularly lesbians, who practice, advocate, or enjoy fantasies which involve some aspect of “politically incorrect” sex. We are a coalitionist group committed to the active support of radical perverts in all circles of society. We believe 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. We are committed to the empowerment of the individual-the right of every woman to use her sexual body as she chooses” (Lesbian Sex Mafia 1983, p.601).

<sup>121</sup> “Speakouts” were common feminist events where women gathered to share their views.

and vocal lesbian SM and pro-sex community; one of the first moments – in NYC at least– in which a public debate about SM occurred and women were forced to defend themselves in person to one another as SM dykes.<sup>122</sup>

While the Barnard Conference itself and the picketing has received a lot of scholarly attention, the Speakout is somewhat overshadowed and at the time was equally controversial as the conference as Fran Moira's report shows (1982).<sup>123</sup> Unlike the main conference itself, the proceedings were not published in book form, but lived on only in the pages of the publications that reported on it.<sup>124</sup>

First there was an official afternoon workshop at the conference entitled “Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality” (see Figure 28).<sup>125</sup> This issue was a pertinent one that the members of the conference Planning Committee had grappled with. “Lesbians think they are not politically correct; heterosexual women think they are not politically correct. No one feels politically correct. Who is politically correct? What is a politically correct sexual line?” they asked (Kritzman & Vance 1981, p.3, Allison Papers, Box 21).<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Although Califia's utterly exhausted letter and Samois' run-ins with anti-pornography feminists on the West Coast, as detailed below, indicate that this was nothing new for some SM activists (Califia 1983a; Califia 1983b).

<sup>123</sup> For example, in her entire thesis, Warner only mentions it once, describing that its call is printed as her response in *Feminist Studies* (2011, p.151).

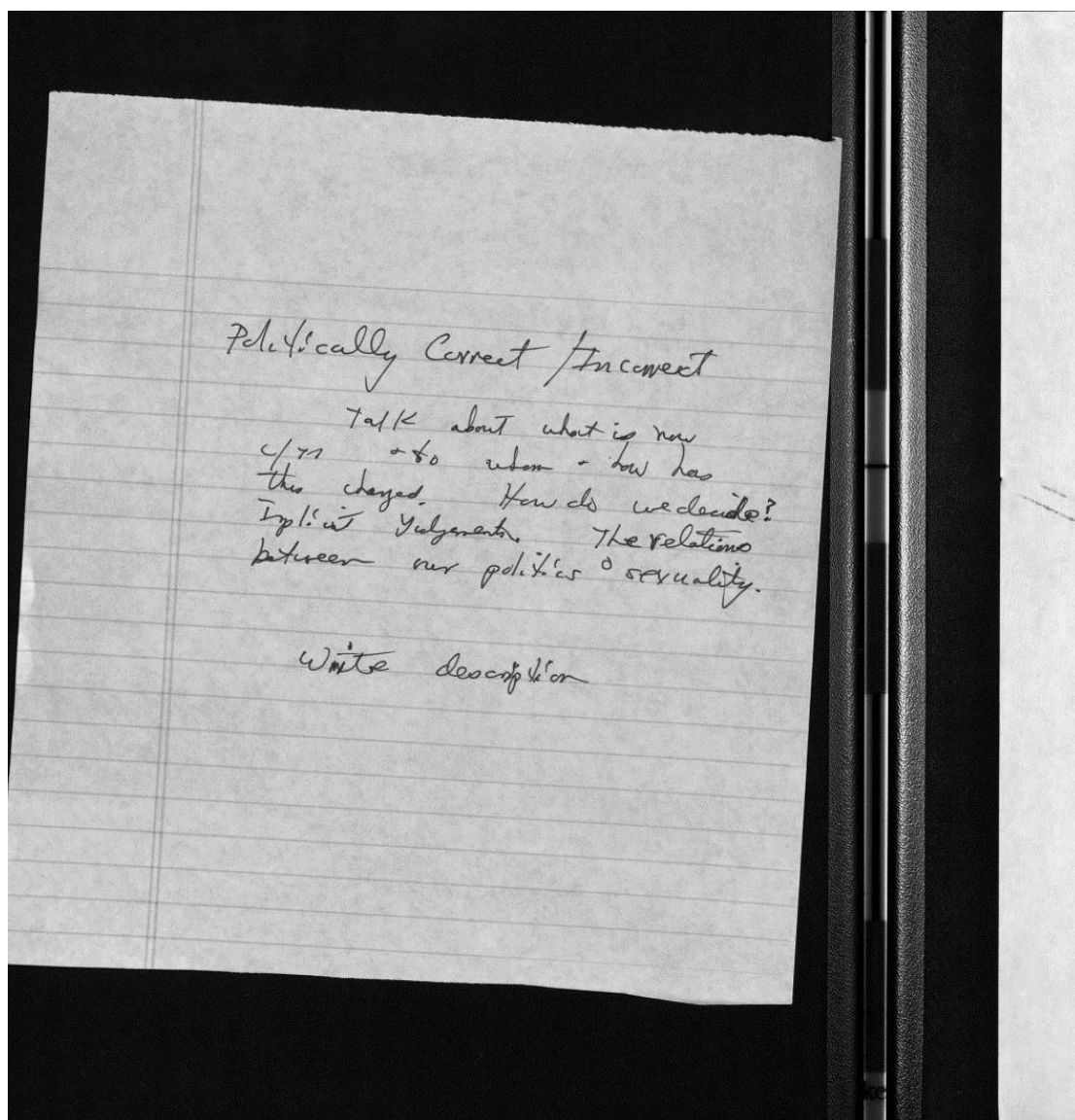
<sup>124</sup> There are several possible reasons for this. It was possibly the first time a lesbian SM group was organising a major event, legitimised by its association with the conference, reaching a much larger (and different) audience than just those brave or curious enough to venture to a normal LSM meeting. Nevertheless, the topic was still sensitive and just outside the bounds (literally, temporally, physically) of the conference itself. Unlike the conference where the speakers wore professional outfits, at the Speakout Allison and Rubin were decked out in leather.

<sup>125</sup> The panel featured anthropologist Muriel Dimen, Joan Nestle (founder of the LHA), Mirtha Quintanales as well as Dorothy Allison. A text by Muriel Dimen from this panel was published in *Pleasure and Danger* (1989 pp.138-48).

<sup>126</sup> It was clear that this was a particularly sticky topic; in another meeting, they wondered about the “links between sexual ‘political correctness’, and other forms of ‘political correctness’ both on the left and the right”(Janie Kritzman & Vance 1981c, p.2, Allison Papers, Box 21). Jane Gaines begins to try to answer these questions with regards to female heterosexuality more than ten years later, and they still remain murky (Gaines 1995).



**Figure 28 The “Politically Correct, Politically Incorrect Sexuality” panel. From left to right pictured speakers include: Muriel Dimen, Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, Mirtha N. Quintaneles and Jan Boney (moderator) (Morgan Gwenwald Collection, LHA).**



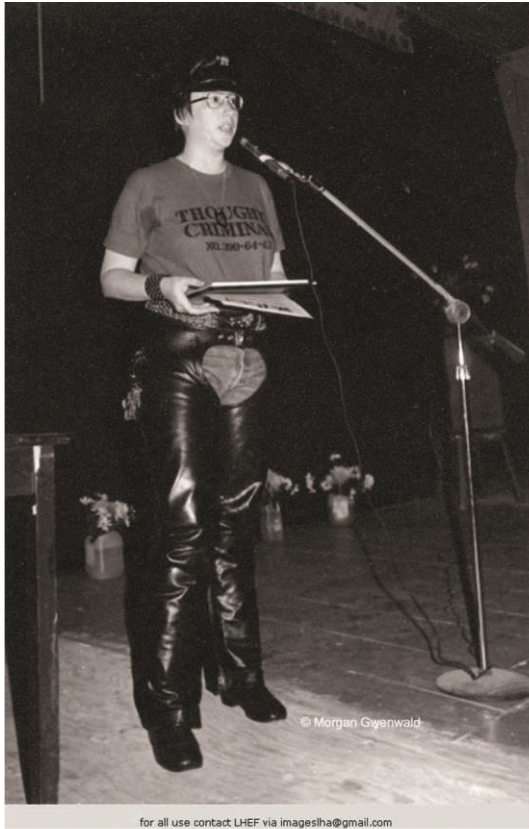
**Figure 29 Allison's notes in the early stages of the conference workshop. It reads "Politically Correct/Incorrect. Talk about what is now c/i [correct/incorrect], also when and how this has changed. How do we decide? Implicit judgments. The relations between our politics and sexuality. Write description"(Allison Papers, Box 21).**

While some avoided it, other lesbian feminists chose to confront the matter of political correctness head on. In addition to the official conference, the LSM organised an extra event the next day, April 25, 1982 in New York's East village.<sup>127</sup> The invitation to the Speakout reads (also published in *Feminist Studies*), "Talking about sex in any public way is

<sup>127</sup> It featured some presenters and folks associated with the conference, and others who not, including Dorothy Allison, Judy (now known professionally as Judith) Butler, Judith Cain, Pat Califia, Madeline Davis, Betty Dodson, Jewelle Gomez, Amber Hollibaugh, Barbara Kerr, Cherrie Moraga, Joan Nestle, Mirtha N. Quintanales, Glenda Reye, Lynn Reynolds and others.

dangerous. It is not only that we are raised to believe that there is something wrong with what we desire, but that we all are also persuaded that there is some 'right' correct sexual practice, and therefore its opposite – incorrect” (Lesbian Sex Mafia 1983, pp.601–602). The participants were invited to address two questions. Firstly “How are you a sexual outlaw?” and also “What is it about sex that makes you feel whole and strong?” According to a report in *oob*, around 20 women “spoke out”, although over 400 attended (Moir 1982, LSM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Booklet, LSM Collection, LHA, p.). SM dykes proudly wore their leather to the Speakout, speaking out with their garb, and here addressed the issues that the conference was accused of focussing on, but did not, such as sadomasochism, butch-femme roles and different kinds of desires.





**Figure 30 Clockwise from top left, Gayle Rubin in leather chaps (Fran Moira in her coverage for makes sure to mention this, plus the fact she was wearing pants underneath (1982)), Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, and Jewelle Gomez (Morgan Gwenwald Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives).**

So what was the impact of this speakout? In the only secondary commentary I could find, Jane Gaines suggests “this highly public use of incorrectness served as an ingenious attempt to symbolically turn the moral elitism of mainstream feminism to the advantage of erotic minorities” (1995, p.387). Describing it at the time, Fran Moira stated dramatically in *off our backs*, “I can live with you who call yourselves outlaws, but I cannot agree with you – or have sex with you. Can you live with me?” (1982). Moira positions the sex outlaws as the group who is judgmental and outlawing outlawing other non-outlaws, as well as wanting to have sex with everyone. This empty rhetoric is the most sophisticated part of Moira’s commentary on the LSM speakout.

I suggest that it goes further, both on the personal and political levels (if one can even separate them). Dorothy Allison remembers, “I mean, it really was the case that someone called my boss to tell him all the details of why I was a sex pervert and why they should fire me” (Allison 2007, p.62). She describes how fearful feminists with non-politically correct desires would call her late at night, looking for approval and to share their shame (Allison 1994). The secondary wave took longer to manifest but was also damaging on careers.

But in the secondary wave, who got hit got hit in that subtle area of career making, where they got some serious long-term damage. So people like Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, who are friends of mine, or Carol Vance, who did a lot of the committee work, really took a lot of damage in terms of jobs, tenure, getting their publications accepted (Allison 2007, p.56).

In my discussion, I do not want to lose sight of the seriousness of the impact of this academic conference and its aftermath.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Nor, in fact, do I wish to lose sight of the impact of these discussions more broadly. Allison also reminds us of the sometimes tragic results of societal rejection “at least two women I know who killed themselves because they were real perverts and they knew themselves perverts, and this is the part that always falls out of this discussion” (Allison 2007, p.57). She also describes how she “I lost a lot of friends, for my reasons and theirs, just because I was barely able to — Even people who were trying to be present — and it’s hard for people to be present when you’re suddenly a public pervert” (Allison 2007, p.53)

### 3.4 Feminist media coverage and post-Barnard conference sex panic

The battle did not end when the Barnard conference and LSM Speakout did. Some gay and lesbian press covered both events, but in their largely biased reporting, they helped engender the ensuing moral panic.<sup>129</sup> Rubin lamented in an open letter the failure of the feminist press to discuss at length, or with even an attempt at neutrality, the issues raised by Barnard and the Speakout to *Feminist Studies*:

What is really sad about this whole mess is that a large chunk of feminist opinion on sexuality has been forced out of the feminist press. You won't find it in *oob* [off our backs], *Big Mama Rag*, or *Sinister Wisdom*. You will find it in the feminist wings of the gay press and the left press (Rubin 1982a).

*The Body Politic*, an important Canadian gay newspaper reported on the conference too, illustrating its wide resonance as well as its resonance outside of academia.<sup>130</sup> Their headline reads, “Feminists split on ‘correct’ sex”, but they only describe the WAP’s picketing, further entrenching the notion that the conference was sadomasochists versus the rest (Anon 1982).<sup>131</sup> However, it is worth looking at the *off our backs* coverage slightly more in detail because not only was it the “leading lesbian newspaper” at the time, also “by far the most popular and well-read feminist media source throughout the 1970s, specifically geared towards lesbian culture” (Ginsburg 2013b, pp.2, 106). *oob* also included several pages covering the conference, but ignored most of the content, focusing only on the Speakout and three of the 18 workshops, creating the impression the conference was based on SM and butch-femme.

What is even more frustrating, even reading over fifteen years later, was *off our back*’s reporting of the issue in their decade overview in 1985 (Douglas 1984, p.9). After all

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<sup>129</sup> Outside the scope of my study was the impact that the conference had, if anyone, in bringing feminist discourses outside of the feminist academy, and how that shaped the public’s understanding of feminism at that time.

<sup>130</sup> *The Body Politic* was a Canadian gay monthly magazine published between 1971 to 1987 and like *GNC*, one of the most important and well read in North America.

<sup>131</sup> Allison kept many clippings about the conference (Allison Papers, Box 21).

the long and detailed responses criticising their coverage as unfairly privileging SM and butch-femme, with examples, in depth and reasonable argumentation, how does *off our backs* report on the conference (“by far the most controversial conference *oob* covered – ever”) only three years later (Douglas 1985, p.9)?

*oob* reported that most speakers supported a politics of sexuality that differed from that espoused by the anti-pornography movement the by-then common lesbian feminist critique of heterosexuality. Speakers defended heterosexuality, butch-femme roles and sadomasochism. (Ibid., p.9).

Where to begin with this? Heterosexuality jumps out to replace pornography as one of the supposed main issues of the day defended by the perverse. The utter inappropriateness of the leaflet, for example, is completely ignored with the neutral standalone statement that WAP “picketed the conference” (Ibid., p.9).<sup>132</sup>

Academic journal *Feminist Studies* went one step further. Alongside this petition, *Feminist Studies* reprinted the leaflet in its entirety (including the original names and misinformation!), bringing these accusations and a wide, national audience much bigger than that of the original 800 conference attendants. Califia, in a somewhat angry, somewhat frustrated and defeated letter to *Feminist Studies* editor (private correspondence separate to the response she wrote for publication), laments that both the petition and the leaflet were placed out of context, thus illegible:

your readers who have not been following the debates over porn and other aspects of sexuality will have no idea what kind of work myself, Dorothy [Allison], Gayle [Rubin], Ellen [Willis] or Amber [Hollibaugh] have done, and in that kind of environment, mud sticks the best (Califia 1983a, Allison Papers, Box 4).

They apologised and published responses from the five named victims two issues later (*Feminist Studies*, Notes and Letters, 9(3), 1983, pp.589-602) but the damage was done, and

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<sup>132</sup> Even more outrageously, Douglas goes on to add that “*oob* was critical of some speakers’ presentation of movement history and *oob* reporters expressed distance from sadomasochism and butch femme roles, while not denying that feminists can disagree over these or other issues while each making valuable contributions” (1985, p.9). So not only does she paint the conference themes incorrectly, depicting (yet again) their *perceived* conflicts which in turn became the *actual* conflicts, but she also obscures the political censor-ship and censure-ship enacted by *oob*’s biased reporting.

the debate was nationwide, their noxious claims verified and legitimised by its association with an academic journal, however unintentionally.

What we see here is a typical example of a full-blown sex panic (see 1.4.3). Janice Irvine's intervention into theories of sex panics (in other words, thinking about sex politically) is the importance of public emotion. These debates were a main issue within the lesbian feminist subculture, an imagined community of sorts (to borrow Benedict Anderson's famous term).<sup>133</sup> She explains, that the "legitimizing power of emotions naturalizes sexual hierarchies, establishing some sexualities as normal and others as disgusting or unspeakable. Affective conventions of sexuality — in particular, sexual shame, stigma, fear, disgust — enforce and reinforce this regulatory system and are therefore political" (2008, p. 3). WAP's actions in discrediting the conference and the subsequent uncritical reporting spread stigma and disgust at the women who embodied sexualities at the bottom of their perceived sexual hierarchy. In trying to disrupt the conference and in intimidating those who attended, WAP was literally trying to make the topic *unspeakable*. So it doesn't matter if the arguments against SM are factually flawed or run in circles, because public emotion has cultural authority; hyperboles are loud and result in reactionary political action (Irvine 2008, p.2). The high level politics Irvine refers to doesn't get involved here; Reagan did not comment on lesbian SM, but I we have already seen how the Conference diary was confiscated, and in chapter 4 I explain in depth more actions taken against SM lesbians and pro-sex feminists (4.4).

In her closing address of the conference, which she called "Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure", writer, femme and activist Amber Hollibaugh posed a series of questions to the audience, which I pose again here:

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<sup>133</sup> Anderson defines an imagined community as one that is not based on personal, face to face relationships but rather a group that considers itself to have things in common (Anderson 1991).

Who are all the women who don't come gently and don't want to; don't know yet what they like but intend to find out; are the lovers of butch or femme women; who like fucking with men; practise consensual s/m; feel more like faggots than dykes; love dildoes, penetration, costumes; like to sweat, talk dirty, see expressions of need swamp their lovers' faces; are confused and need to experiment with their own tentative ideas of passion; think gay male porn is hot; are into power? Are we creating a political movement that we can no longer belong to if we don't feel our desires fit a model of proper feminist sex? (Hollibaugh 1989, p.403).

From the 1970s to the sex wars' beginnings in the early 1980s, we can see a shift from "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practise" (chapter 2) to "pornography is the theory; rape the practice" to something like patriarchy is the theory, sadomasochism is the practise? Indeed, while scholar Caroline Gonda's phrasing is binary and simplifying, she creates nice visual image: "The choice between the literal restrictions of S/M bondage and the ideological restrictions of correct lesbian-feminist sex must often have seemed unappealing" (Gonda 1998, p.120).

Hollibaugh describes a true litany of outsiders. The answer is they were forming alternate feminist communities, for example, such as SM support groups like LSM, Urania, Shelix, Samois, The Outcasts, Wicked Women, and Briar Rose, and their own publications, like *Bad Attitude*, *On Our Backs* and *Outrageous Women*. While histories of all these groups are waiting to be written, and this thesis begins to address their stories. In my next chapter, I focus on the second: publications.

## Chapter 4

### Feminist Discourses Critiquing SM in 1980s America

*The 'sex wars' themselves were no party and no joke. [...] "bad" lesbian sex [was] attacked as male-identified—butch-fem dykes and Samois activists were cut off from the normalizing feminine, and cast into the vile male 'outside' envisioned by antiporn feminism. Antiporners construct a wacky feminist world in which heterosexual monogamous marriage... is not suspect as 'patriarchal,' but lesbian sex is...because it's 'male'!*

- Lisa Duggan, "Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Popular Culture" (Duggan & Hunter 2006, pp.9–10)

*We are told S/M is responsible for practically every ill and inequity, large and small, that the 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.*

- Katherine Davis, introduction to *Coming to Power* (Davis 1981, p.8)

*Will you deny your sisters or yourself crescendos of rapture because liberated women aren't supposed to like it that way?*

– Barbara Ruth, "Cathexis" in *Hera*, 1975 (Ruth 1975)

This chapter focuses on the side of the sex wars that Duggan calls was "no party and no joke": feminist critiques of (lesbian) feminist SM using the voices of feminists writing in

the late 1970s to early 1990s, mostly in the US, but also in the UK.<sup>134</sup> An overwhelming abundance of comments about SM were uttered, shouted and written during this time period decrying forms “bad” lesbian sex, as Duggan notes above. These documents, obtained largely through my archival research, provide the basis for my analysis in this chapter of the controversial relationship between feminism, lesbianism and sadomasochism. I have chosen to focus on only a few feminist publications from the time, both academic texts (of which there are a handful), published books, and articles and letters to the editor in mainstream, lesbian/feminist publications *Lesbian Connection*, *Lesbian Tide*, *On Our Backs*, *Plexus* and *Hera*. All manner of diverse critiques were made, here I restrict myself to addressing the most common ones, such as SM’s “obvious” replication of patriarchal oppression. I go on to outline some anti-SM actions, such as targeting bookstores that stocked SM materials. I will consider the ways in which the anti-SM discourse acts as an attempted consolidator of lesbian identity in a historical moment when essentialist notions of sisterhood were crumbling. I identify the underlying issue as an anxiety over defining “lesbian” and “feminist”. I contend that these anxieties can be understood broadly as the threat a postmodern plurality and struggles of power, knowledge and discourse, posed to a unified lesbian feminist politics.

It makes sense to begin with the book *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, the first (another was released in 1993) feminist book dedicated to critiquing SM.<sup>135</sup> It is dedicated to “women who are striving to end power disparities in both their intimate

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<sup>134</sup> Although my thesis is based in the American context, Rose Bush (2015) emphasises the cultural exchange between London and San Francisco in particular during this period.

<sup>135</sup> *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Sadomasochism in the Gay 90s* (Reti 1993). This book certainly deserves its own analysis, which I do not have the space to do, as it emerged in a political and cultural moment when feminism looked very different from 1982, when *Against Sadomasochism* was published.



relationships and in the world at large” (Linden et al. 1982, Dedication).<sup>136</sup> Who are such women, in the eyes of this volume’s editors? Certainly not SM lesbians. The dedication above takes up the idea that one’s sexual, intimate and personal life reflects one’s convictions in one’s political life, a notion clearly seen in this dedication, and stemming perhaps from the second wave mantra of “the personal is political”. Indeed, more often than not, Rubin’s famous articles, “Thinking Sex” and the “Traffic in Women”, for example, have not been critiqued from an intellectual standpoint, but rather Rubin herself attacked for her membership in Samois (Duggan 2011, p.146).<sup>137</sup>

The dedication further relies on the idea that some women practice feminism *properly*, i.e. by “striving to end power disparities in both their intimate relationships and in the world at large”, while others who either do not see power disparities in SM or other controversial practises, or do and get pleasure from eroticising them, are excluded.<sup>138</sup> For this reason, discussions of sadomasochism are inextricable from, and often unfairly equated with (by critics, not the SM dykes themselves), debates about pornography, dildos, violence against women, and butch-femme “role playing”.

In the introduction to *Coming to Power*, Katherine Davis writes that “S/M fantasies and S/M sex between feminist lesbians have been one of the most avoided topics of discussion in the movement” (1981, p.7). The veracity of this claim is questionable; as I have outlined already and as we see from the quotes opening this chapter, both the salvoes against

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<sup>136</sup> This is the first of two, from editors Darlene R. Pagano and Diana E.H. Russell. The second, from Robin Ruth Linden and Susan Leigh Star is a quote from Muriel Rukeyser’s “Letters from the Front” (1944): “For every human freedom, suffering to be free, Daring to live for the impossible” (Linden et al. 1982, pt.Dedication). I read this as a dedication to feminists struggling with their internalised, patriarchal, sadomasochistic desires, calling for them to fight to overcome them, as well as those “good” feminists who fight to bring these SM feminists to their senses. I find it in terribly bad taste to compare a battle against sadomasochism with warfare and the Holocaust.

<sup>137</sup> Duggan makes another important point: these attacks were based on Rubin’s *assumed* sexual practices and tastes based on her political positions and involvement in Samois; she did not actually write or publish about her personal life (Duggan 2011, p.146).

<sup>138</sup> I want to stress that not all SM lesbians conceive of their desires or erotise power in the same way. This diversity can be seen in the range of voices in coming to power (Samois 1981) and the internal conflict the collective went through to agree on what was appropriate to publish within (Davis 1981, pt.11–12).

SM as well as careful discussions had already begun, at least on the West coast, in the late 1970s. These did not reach everyone, however. The newness of the topic in public discourse is illustrated by one lesbian letter writer, Susanna Sturgis, who describes how, when she first heard of Samois in 1980, the idea was so terrible she thought it was a joke (Sturgis 1986, p.11).

Nevertheless by the mid-80s the topic was certainly not avoided, sparked in part by the publication of three important volumes.<sup>139</sup> That all of the authors in *Against Sadoomasochism* used their real names while half in *Coming to Power* wrote under pseudonyms indicates the public favour (Davis 1981, p.12).<sup>140</sup>

But already by the mid-1980s, lesbians and feminists, it seems, were already rather sick of discussing the contentious issue of lesbian SM practices. A review of *Against Sadoomasochism* in radical lesbian publication *off our backs* (*oob*), two years after it was released, begins with the complaint that, “far from being eager to get in another kick at the s&m crowd, we were tired of the issue. We had had our say, and didn't want to keep on repeating our words” (Douglas 1984, p.25).<sup>141</sup> Another frustrated *Lesbian Connection* letter writer was not entirely sick of the topic itself, but the circular debates about its political correctness: “could we see some other perspectives on lesbian sadoomasochism besides

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<sup>139</sup> Samois’ anthology *Coming to Power* (first printed 1981, reprinted 1982), Robin Ruth Linden et al’s edited collection *Against Sadoomasochism* (1982), and then in 1984 came *Pleasure and Danger*, which although containing no papers directly about SM (like the conference itself), was deeply bound up with the issue because of the feminist backlash that accompanied it (see chapter 3). Furthermore, eleven out of 25 essays in 1982’s *Against Sadoomasochism* were reprints from elsewhere, and of these, seven were first published much earlier (between 1975-1980), making it clear that the discussion *was* already taking place, but on a smaller, and less “hysterical” scale. What it also makes clear, however, is that almost half of the book does not engage with any of the pro-SM material published in *Coming to Power* in 1981, even as the book was conceived as a response to it.

<sup>140</sup> Earlier pro-SM writers published in local magazines had not, by contrast, used pseudonyms for the most part. Whether this represents a sea change in the intensity of public attitudes between the late 1970s and the 1980s, or if it reflects that more open people are more inclined to write and publish, I hesitate to say.

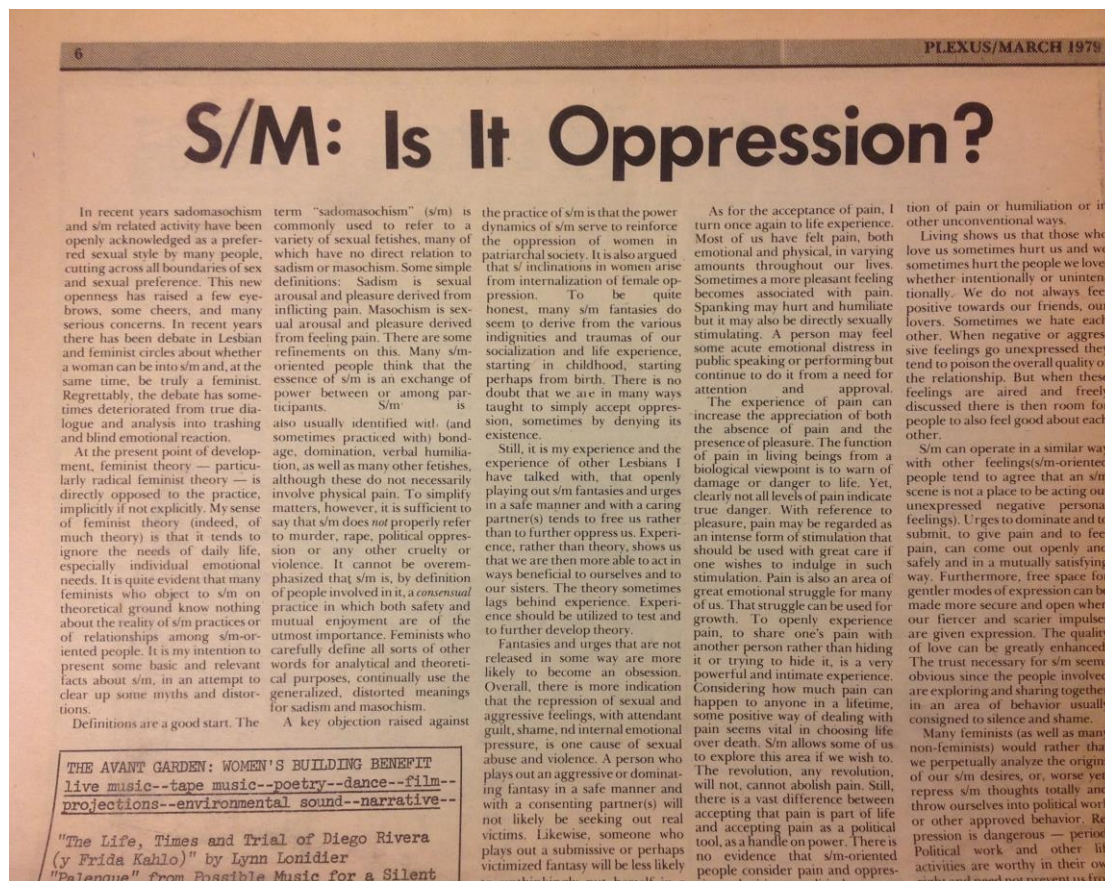
<sup>141</sup> It is interesting to note that they do not review Samois’ volume, *Coming to Power* (1981), alongside this, which seems rather like an anti-SM bias. It is also curious is why it took them so long after *Coming to Power*’s publication to write a review. Did they feel like they had already said everything they needed to on the topic, but were pushed back into it because of the publication of *Pleasure and Danger*? Reviews of it were being published in various feminist papers, this may have had an effect as well.

whether or not it's politically correct?" (Anon 1986a, p.11). This frustrated lesbian, wherever she is now, would still be waiting, because, as I discuss below, at least in mainstream lesbian publications (radical sex magazines were different, see chapter 5), debates were rather stagnant. Concerns that had been plaguing the second wave feminist movement since its inception over what counted as a good lesbian, a proper feminist, the right kind of sex and pleasure, continued to dominate discussions of sexuality.

Where were these debates happening? In person, in academic journals, at conferences, and on the pages of feminist newsletters (especially the letters to the editor section) (Power, pers. comm, 14 May, 2015). Academic discourse, public speech and letters to the editor mix and merge.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Letters to the editor quote scholars, and scholars bringing in their personal and political experiences, with very similar language and arguments used in both. For example, the highly philosophical responses to the review of Hoagland's academic book *Lesbian Ethics* in *off our backs* (1989, (5)3, p.26). It was also not uncommon to see a letter writer references a quote using a footnote as if writing in an academic journal. Califia is casual and sarcastic in her letter to *Feminist Studies*, not employing an academic tone at all (Califia 1983b). Furthermore, as the Barnard conference illustrated (see chapter 3), academic discourse mixes with slanderous journalism in the infamous leaflet.



**Figure 31 "S/M: Is It Oppression?" - getting down to the main question in monthly San Francisco Bay Area feminist magazine *Plexus*, March 1979, p.6 by Janet Schrim (1979) [Allison Papers, Box 20]. This was an extract from an anthology called *A Woman's Touch: An Anthology of Lesbian Eroticism and Sensuality for Women Only*, published later that year (Cedar & Nelly 1979). Schrim also contributed to *Coming to Power*.**

## 4.1 Struggles over defining SM, defining consent

What's wrong with lesbian sadomasochism? To answer this first we need to answer, what is SM? This itself is a contested front of competing and contradicting knowledges, but in this section I consider the key issues that recur in feminist anti-SM feminist writing of the period — all of which stem from the problematic nature of consent. Sadomasochism is imagined as both everywhere ("a cancerous growth that has taken a firm root in most wimmin" (Walker-

Crawford 1982, p.150)), and nowhere (as in this mild critique by Sisley & Harris 1977, p.148).<sup>143</sup>

It's our distinct impression that not many lesbians are into sadomasochism—probably because women are fighting hard to escape centuries of what feels like slavery, as well as male-imposed myths of martyrdom and women's liking to be beaten up. Most women recoil at equating eroticism with playing rough in scenes that bear a resemblance to Nazi experimental stations... However, what is rare does exist and there is no sound reason for denying yourself the S and M experience if it interests you—and if your partner willingly consents. But you do need to be careful (Sisley & Harris 1977, p.148).

Furthermore, consensual is a key part of SM's definition in feminist terms. All examples that I found in the feminist movement deplored unconsensual SM, labelling it violence and abuse. However, there are fundamental, perhaps irreconcilable differences between people's versions of consent. In her contribution to *Coming to Power*, "S/M, Feminism, and Issues of Consent", Joanna Reimoldt defines feminism as "the belief in the right of women to self-determination" – as long as nobody is harmed in the process (1982, p.80). However, there is no consensus either on what counts as "harm". Others question the very possibility of consenting to SM. In Lisa Duggan's formulation, critiques of consent in SM actually inversed the patriarchal notion that, "she says no but she really means yes" by arguing that "she says yes but she really means no" (Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.7).

SM is sometimes conceived of as solely a sexual practice. Sheila Jeffreys in her comparison of SM and Nazi Germany calls SM a "practice which allows lesbians to experience an otherwise elusive sexual satisfaction" (Jeffreys 1993, p.33). In this way, SM is an optional sexual activity; SM dykes are not separated from "vanilla" lesbians but are rather vanilla lesbians engaging in despicable behaviour with only the quest for "elusive sexual satisfaction" as an excuse. Nevertheless, for Jeffreys, SM dykes are not a sexual "species" on

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<sup>143</sup> The SM dykes themselves do this too. Califia notes that only 17 were at Samois' first meeting (Califia 1982, p.248), while Rubin recounts 40 being there (Wechsler 1981, n.p.).

their own. At other times, it is related to a lack of holistic care of the self: “We beat and badge [somasochistic] women”, but really, writer Vivienne Walker-Crawford suggests, we should address our inner fears and addictions (1982, p. 150). Or even as a mixture of both, a “form of self-injury” (Jeffreys 1993, p.35). In other contexts, she argues, such behaviour would not be condoned even if it made the person feel good, but because SM exists in the realm of the sexual other standards apply. Here, SM is a reflection of a flawed inner being, here is Foucault’s *species*.

Yet, in critical discussions of SM, the specific sexual practices involved are seldom, if ever named.<sup>144</sup> Terms are vague, such as simply “power”, “submission”, “domination”, “top”, “bottom”, and do not describe the acts themselves, and dynamics are explained solely in terms of a male dominant and female submissive, neglecting the gender and role diversity as well as those who switch roles. In discussing whether or not to allow SM groups to meet at the London Lesbian and Gay Center in the early 1980s, for example, SM advocates described, “no one talked about SM sex” (Ardill & O’Sullivan 1986, p.44). Ritchie and Barker (2005) recently note many critiques display little knowledge of what feminist s/m *actually is*.<sup>145</sup> This lack of specificity and first hand knowledge is particularly evident in an article by Reina Lewis and Karen Adler, two British feminist academics’ writing in 1990 (but

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<sup>144</sup> Safety manuals, discussion groups and sex positive magazines (along with some erotica) might actually have been the only way for many women to understand what SM was all about (Califia 1988b).

<sup>145</sup> They write, “We are not clear how a scene where a woman beats her boyfriend with a crop and then penetrates him with a strap-on dildo reproduces ‘the hierarchical ordering of gender’ nor how a scene where she slowly pierces the skin of her girlfriend’s arms and chest with medical needles ‘eroticises the crude power difference of gender’ (Ritchie & Barker, 2005).

only published in 1994) on the imagined realities of SM they seem to dream up. Let us consider the following explanation of the role of the bottom's consent:<sup>146</sup>

But sm itself is fuelled by an unacknowledged fantasy—the fantasy of the bottom/masochist's 'no.' The structure of sm's code of consent rests on the possibility of the 'bottom' saying no by using the code word that will stop activity and return the balance of power. But this no is strangely absent from sm stories and one wonders how it works in real life (Lewis & Adler, 1994, p. 439).

In this description, the top is essentially abusing the bottom non-consensually (436-7). The authors seem to be gaining their knowledge of SM from “sm stories” and erotica, not “real life”. One would not even think to make generalisations about *all* heterosexual (or for that matter lesbian) sex from erotica. Secondly, they have not talked to those practicing consent – this might clear up confusion about how it “works in real life” – or rather, *can* work (since the nature of consent, like everything else, is based on the nature of the people entering into an agreement). Without addressing the diversity and specificity of SM practices, no worthwhile critique can be offered. Yet without open forums, these sorts of essential discussions and learning periods were few and far between.

So back to my original question: what *is* wrong with lesbian SM? Why is it associated with the de-unification of the lesbian subject? In short, to borrow a punny title of an SM critique, “S/M Keeps Lesbians Bound to the Patriarchy” (quoted in Rubin, 2011, p. 123). “Sadomasochistic activity between/among lesbians is an outcome and perpetuation of patriarchal sadistic and masochistic culture” (ibid). SM is an embodiment of heterosexual power relations, reflecting and repeating patriarchal structures. “I see sadomasochism as resulting in part from the internalization of heterosexual dominant-submissive role playing”

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<sup>146</sup> In terms of Lewis and Adler's credentials to speak with such authority on SM, neither of these two academics had published anything on this topic before or note it in their stated research interests. Furthermore, Adler has published nothing concerning s/m since, although Lewis had another anti- (although more measured) s/m piece published in the same year on Della Grace's collection of photographs *Love Bites* (1991) under the great title “Dis-Graceful Images: Della Grace and Lesbian Sado-Masochism” (Lewis 1994). This is not to say that they should not have published this article, but the question “who speaks, and from where”, is vital from a feminist standpoint.

(Diana Russell, “Sadomasochism as a Contra-feminist Activity”, quoted in Rubin 2011, p.122-3.). The choice to engage in such behaviours is not, therefore, a feminist one because it is (unconscious) coercion by patriarchal forces. Anti-SM discourse saw SM as continuous with the power structures of patriarchal domination, but this critique (to say nothing yet of its legitimacy/illegitimacy) relied upon a certain vagueness or generality in its account of SM.

#### 4.2 Sock it to me: patronising as anti-SM strategy

If vagueness and excessive generality were one recurrent feature of anti-SM writing, trivialization was another. The first thing that jumped out upon my first reading of *Against Sadomasochism* was the abundance of sock analogies – two extended ones in two separate essays.<sup>147</sup> The majority of Vivienne Walker-Crawford’s contribution, “The Saga of Sadie O. Massey”, is a story about the eponymous hero, who continues to wear thick, grey, woollen socks despite the warm weather, and despite her lover’s concerns about their suitability. “Sadie was adamant. After all, she had worn them every day of her life. She was used to them. They were good for her and she was good for them” (Walker-Crawford 1982, p.147). She goes on to explicitly explain (in case there was any doubt) that the wool socks represent a “previous form of security” provided by the oppressive, but familiar, patriarchy, that is no longer necessary in the “warm climate” of the feminist movement (Walker-Crawford 1982, p.148). In the next chapter, Sarah Lucia Hoagland asks,

If you have on a pair of socks and cannot see that they do not match, what can I say? I can test your eyes for color blindness and I can check to see you understand what the word ‘match’ means. But if your vision is fine and your understanding of English is good, then beyond pointing out the mismatch to you, is meaningful dialogue possible? (Hoagland 1982, p.153).

This is not just a matter of amusement; I think indicates the patronising attitude with which many anti-SM writers have approached the topic. It is so obvious, that the only way one would be able to think differently is through some sort of blindness, or cognitive lack, and

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<sup>147</sup> And these are just the ones I found. There could be many more out there.



thus “meaningful dialogue” is assumed impossible. In this analogy, SM feminists see and do not mind that their socks are mismatched; they do not try and work to the norms. But these sock analogies are hardly convincing - nobody is harmed when socks mismatch, and some have colder feet than others. The counter-intuitive character of the analogy is confusing: if you really want to criticize something, why choose an analogy that makes it seem trivial and unimportant?

Walker-Crawford further gives examples of possible “wool socks” that “some of us have struggled with”, including addiction (to cigarettes, caffeine, sugar, drugs, alcohol, work), not taking good self care – staying in poor relationships, not taking time to recover from burnout, eating badly and so on (1982, pp.148–9). These forms of “slow suicide” are self-destructive, she writes, and are learned behaviour to deal with oppression (ibid., p.149). Sadomasochism is “the one drink too many that makes us too drowsy to rise and jog the next morning” – holding us back from our true potential (ibid.). Following her argument, then, if one is a truly liberated feminist, one can shake off desires for sadomasochism, and replace those woollen socks with some summer sandals (practical, no heel, I suspect).<sup>148</sup> This condescending way of addressing sadomasochists works to establish them as less developed both as feminists and as logical thinkers. Not only are their sexual desires questioned, but also their intelligence.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> This was not an argument solely deployed against sadomasochists. The same argument holds for butch-femme. Like SM, butch-femme roles were controversial as they were accused by some of reflecting and reinforcing patriarchy, as such, couples too are accused of being a mere imitation of heterosexuality (see Carter and Noble; Nilson 2011; Goodloe 1993) and “assumed to involve two women locked in a drama that reworks classic heterosexual dominant submissive behaviour” (Blackman and Perry 1990, 71). In this formulation, butch femme *is in fact a version of sm*. The leaflet circulated by WAP at the Barnard conference claims: “also among the speakers and workshop leaders are several women who champion butch-femme sex roles, while denying that these roles have any relation to the male-female sex roles that are the psychological foundation of patriarchy” (cited in Basiliere, 2008). Both SM and butch/femme are argued to uphold the heterosexual and patriarchal paradigm. In this way, we can see SM being represented not solely as a sexual act, or even a sexual identity, but more a *mode of interaction*.

<sup>149</sup> Such patronisation is recognisable from racist and sexist discourse, where the “othered” people of colour and women were belittled, with the white male knowing best. This seems to be the echo, then, of the medical pathology version of sadomasochism: basically a form of political false-consciousness rather than psychopathology!

Considering that many of the loudest voices on the pro-sex side were in fact professional academics (such as Rubin, Snitow, Vance, Doughty etc.) or cultural writers/activists tangentially connected to academia (like Willis, Allison, Hollibaugh), questioning their *intelligence* was a curious anti-SM move. In questioning on their capacity as thinkers and professionals, the anti-SM folks attempt to remove the necessity of engaging with these pro-sex feminists' substantive *arguments*, but can rather focus on personal attacks. As I described in the case of the Barnard in 1982 (see chapter 3), it was enough simply to be *seen* cavorting with (or just walking near to) known SM lesbians to be disgraced and your opinion *on any topic* discredited.<sup>150</sup> This is the stirrings of another emerging political identity, that of the “pro-sex” feminist. This is an identity situated in relation to (and founded in) a discourse on sexuality in that the sexual dimension of the self is the germinal root of everything about the body and mind. However it differs from that of the homosexual or the sadomasochist because it exists without a reliance on either performing certain sexual acts or feeling certain “incorrect” desires. Its membership is made up simply of people who are in solidarity with those who have different desires whether that be a strategic political stance that could be claimed in solidarity with SM dykes, but also the label could be thrust upon you to discredit your activist and intellectual credentials. Their solidarity, however, is enough for them to have their intelligence questioned. This is yet another method of not engaging with substantive debate, but focussing on personal and professional smears tactics while still not knowing – and not trying to find out – the difference between flagellation and fisting.

#### **4.3 Feminist bookstores and SM**

Feminist institutions also contributed to the lack of substantive debate about SM. Even with the proliferation of both publications discussing SM and those including SM materials, there

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<sup>150</sup> Doughty describes how “a woman handing out the fliers told a mutual acquaintance that I had been ‘with the sm people’ at the conference” (1982, p.26).

was no guarantee that one's local bookshop would stock materials they deemed immoral.<sup>151</sup> *Coming to Power* was even burned outside a women's bookstore in London in 1993 (Chenier 2004).

The place of SM in bookstores was disputed. Betty Granda, the manager of The Bookstore in Springfield, IL, wrote a polite but clear letter, drawing on the discourses of freedom of expression and principles of non-violence and animal rights:

Though I support your right to publish, I just don't feel comfortable with the leather and S&M stuff being sold in my bookstore that supports animal rights and non-violence. So I think for now I'll discontinue receiving *On Our Backs* (Granda 1989, p.3).

Furthermore, we can see local conflicts being played out on a national and international level throughout these letter pages. One reader from Albuquerque writes to complain how "'our'" local feminist bookshop, Full Circle Bookstore, shelved *Coming to Power* in the section with rape, incest and violence against "wimmin" (*Lesbian Connection*, 1985,(8)2, p.10). The writer and her girlfriend moved the volume to the "Lesbian Sexuality" section of the bookstore, but when they returned a few days later it was back in original position alongside violence against women texts. When asked to justify this placement, one of the owners "turned her back on me and offered no words, and the other responded smugly, 'because it's abusive'". They questioned the owners' rights to impose their opinion, and asked why they stocked the book at all if it was so offensive to them. The reply was "we don't want to censor". Here we have a situation where, although including SM material in the name of freedom of expression, its content is misconstrued. The Albuquerque letter writer does not agree with the store owners. She claims that by putting the book in the violence section, it is

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<sup>151</sup> *On Our Backs* was not stocked in the Toronto Women's Bookstore, for example, or by feminist bookstore Lunaria in Northampton. One reader wrote to *On Our Backs* that she was driving to hours to another city to pick up *OOB*, because the local gay bookstore would not sell it as it contained penetration (Blevens 1989, p.7). Not all bookstores were hostile. Samois held their first public forum in San Francisco's Old Wives Tales bookstore (Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.21).

a manipulation of the mind of wimmin who walk into your store. This is an act of psychological censorship. You are putting a negative label on a book, similar to a straight bookstore placing a book about gay and Lesbian issues in the Deviant Psychology Section (Ibid.).

This Albuquerque lesbian asks what is gained by the feminist movement in cutting off SM dykes from the conversation and not attempting to understand their point of view. Categorization (violence or sexuality?) here acts as a kind of censorship, not unlike how it did at Barnard, raising questions about the politics of framing, and avoiding direct engagement with what is inside the books themselves.

This letter received a flurry of responses in the next issue, including a defence from the bookshop owners, who stated that they were not trying to “force these opinions on others”, but rather as a feminist bookstore they were expressing their personal values. Most interesting to me about their letter was the analogy at the end: “We carry a book titled *Ladykillers* which strongly condemns smoking. It is also shelved in the abuse section since both of us believe that smoking is harmful and damaging.... Yet one of us smokes” (*Lesbian Connection*, 1985/86, 8(3), p.10). By equating smoking – an addiction with proven health risks, like Walker-Crawford also does above, – and SM play, the shop owners suggest that SMers do something that is bad for them, whether they realise it or not. Like a smoker, they must ignore their desire for the next cigarette, or the next SM scene, and do what is best for themselves. Here patronising discourses mix with benign or kind censorship, guiding the reader to the correct path.

Compared to the events in Northampton, however, categorization problems could be considered relatively mild. The efforts of anti-porn feminists shut down Northampton’s Womonfyre Books (Shelix newsletter, April 1989, Allison Papers, Box 23).<sup>152</sup> In the February 1989 Shelix Newsletter (Shelix collection, LHA), Ben Power accuses Womonfyre

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<sup>152</sup> One reader wrote in to *OOB* and described how their “progressive” bookstore (their usual stocklist for the magazine) was run out of town by “right wing assholes” (R.T. 1989, p.3). Again, right wing tactics align scarily with anti-pornography feminist ones.

of being shut down by anti-sex and pro-censorship activists using dirty tactics, personal attacks on one of the owners. Womonyre had continued to sell *On Our Backs* despite Feminists Against Pornography's threats of boycott and "shocking levels of harassment in the store and at their homes" (Ibid.). The bookstore experienced thefts, and anti-porn feminists arrive to tell them "you sell pornography", waving around copies of *On Our Backs* (Ibid.). Lesbian feminist theory and practice was forced to adjudicate between the opposition to censorship and the opposition to SM.

#### **4.4 Defining good and bad lesbian sex**

Thus far, in this chapter, I have considered the range of discursive strategies – including vagueness, trivialization, and polarization – employed by anti-SM lesbian feminist writers to condemn SM sexuality. In this section, I consider what was really at stake in these debates: the definition of "good" (and "bad") sex.

##### **4.4.1 "Old-fashioned" sex and sexual temporalities**

For lesbian feminists in the period of my study, "good" sex was defined pre-eminently in *temporal* terms. Both "sides" perpetuated discourses of defining "good" and "bad" sex. One further way this is done is through an affective shaming technique of assigning certain temporal specificities to certain practices; battles of definition also occur over what counts as decade-appropriate. Thus, lesbian feminists reject charges that *they* are old-fashioned, and instead denounce SM as firmly belonging in the patriarchal, pre-liberatory past, even the fascist past. One anti-SM tract that circulated the LLGC implores readers to

Remember that SM was a significant part of the 'decadent' social scene in 1930s Berlin - part of the political climate of the day. People acclimatized to SM brutality would have failed to notice the threat of the 'real Nazis' approaching' (Ardill & O'Sullivan, 1986, 50).

Sarah Hoagland, too, defends excluding SM content in lesbian publications by likening it to including Nazi content or articles promoting a return to slavery or white and male supremacy:

“Lesbian Feminist publications do not exist to print and publish anything and everything anyone might wish to publish” (Hoagland 1982, p.154). Even, she adds, if the author claims to be a lesbian and a feminist – such a declaration is not enough to prevent oppressive action, and still warrants corrective censorship (see also 4.3).

Furthermore, in a rather unnecessary complaint about the supposed uniformity of SM fantasies (based, again, not on interviews but on erotica), Lewis and Adler note:

In our reading of erotic literature, we have been repeatedly struck by the uniformity of lesbian sm fantasies. The supposed freeing up of the imagination to allow it to explore multifarious avenues of sexual diversion appears to have devised very little variety, with an endless reiteration of chains, black leather, slavery and Nazi imagery, harnesses and diaphanous white flimsy frocks. As in the early days of the motor car, it seems that one may have any fantasy as long as it's black leather (Lewis & Adler, 1994, p. 435).

Aside from them working from the mistaken assumption that all SM involves leather,<sup>153</sup> the motor car simile again places SM in a time when there were no other (read: better) options available. In this formulation, progress against patriarchy entails renouncing and jettisoning SM.

#### ***4.4.2 When SM dykes attack***

It was not only ‘vanilla’ lesbian feminists who had something to say about the correct way to have sex. They too draw define “good” sex in temporal terms, positioning themselves as the modern, forward thinking women questioning the morals that they have been given. Pro-sex (but not SM) feminist Amy Hoffman explains that “as part of the process of coming out & discovering ourselves as queer people we felt everything we'd been told about sex & gender was misleading if not outright lies, and we wanted to question all of it, without preconceptions, from basic definitions of sex and gender to intergenerational sex, SM, and other sexual behaviors” (pers.comm, May 7, 2015). While most SM dykes might be

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<sup>153</sup> Indeed, considering the general lack of specific information available about SM, perhaps it is not too fair to judge Lewis and Adler *too* harshly in this mistake.

questioning a variety of sexual norms, their answers do not all align. Two self-identified “outrageous and oversexed SM dykes from the East Coast”, ask

We don’t get it? what’s the deal with women ‘portraying’ themselves as equipped with penises. We can’t figure out how this could be erotic to a woman-identified-woman. If they wanted a dick, why are they with a woman wearing a dildo and not a man? We’re heavily into penetration (fisting for two), but this whole life-like dildo market is baffling to us (Daralee and Nancy 1989, p.5).

The editor’s (Susie Bright) reply is cutting: “Assuming you’re not pulling our leg, let’s try a few reasons why lesbians fuck using a dildoe [sic]...” (*On Our Backs*, 1989, 5(3) p.5). In the same issue, a lesbian complains about bisexual women advertising in the personals (ibid, p.5; p.45). Again, the editor’s reply highlights the variance of lesbian sexuality:

*On Our Backs*’ purpose is to uncover lesbian sexuality, no matter how politically incorrect or upsetting to our notions of 100% pure or ‘real’ we like to think we are [...] There is usually something in every issue that will push buttons. Whether it’s s/m, fat women, dildoes or bi’s, *On Our Backs* intends to keep pushing those limits in the hopes of fostering understanding on how differently we express ourselves sexually (Ibid.,p.45).

Another woman, in *Lesbian Connection* this time, writes how she was “struck breathless to see lesbian s/m so enlightenly [sic] mentioned.” She goes on,

I am not suggesting that everyone should try everything, but I am saying that those of us who choose variant sex are not lepers. What galls me is the label ‘politically incorrect sex’. Who is the arbiter of ‘correct’ Lesbian sex? (*Lesbian Connection*, 1986, 8(4), p.12).

Yet, in the very next paragraph, the same author complains about androgynously dressed lesbians, stating it makes them unattractive to women as well as men, as well as complaining about the androgyny trend reaching the straight world so that it becomes unclear as to who is straight and who is gay. “No wonder so many lesbians are lonely”, she concludes (Ibid., p.12). While SM was undeniably targeted and vehemently attacked frequently, it must be placed in the context of many other struggles over defining lesbianism and lesbian sexuality.

#### 4.4.3 In SM recovery/SM gone wrong

Even more moderate critics of SM, while refraining from comparisons with Nazism or Weimar debauchery, tended to place SM sexuality on a timeline – as a kind of youthful indiscretion, or moment of blindness. Less common, but powerful because of the framing as stories of survival, were critiques from women who claimed to have once been into SM, and even enjoyed it at the time, but have since realised the errors of their ways. One letter writer in *Sojourner*, a feminist journal based in Massachusetts, describes the abuse endured in a lesbian SM relationship:

Sadomasochism was a part of the abuse I endured in a recent lesbian relationship... Sadomasochism, in my experience, has nothing to do with love. It is the externalization of self-hatred poured on to another woman's body... My experience shows me that sadomasochism's involvement of an imbalance of power leads to an inherent tendency towards abuse of another's vulnerability. The pretence of consent and free choice advocated among sadomasochists does not account for the intimidation that ones person can exert in that type of relationship (*Sojourner*, June 1988, p.5, Shelix collection, LHA).

Like most critiques of SM, this could be true, and the validity of the author's experience should not be questioned, but the transferability could and should be. Furthermore, it creates the expectation that SM is a desire than can be overcome, even if in the present the sadomasochist is experiencing pleasure and joy, and that SM dykes will, when they come to their senses, regret their involvement in SM. Radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys even claimed that "lesbians who have escaped from injurious S/M relationships are starting to arrive in battered women's shelters in the US" (1993, p. 34).<sup>154</sup>

Furthermore, in "Is Sadomasochism Feminist? A Critique of the Samois Position", an article dedicated to explaining why Samois is not and can not be feminist, argues that any pleasurable sensations from sadomasochism come from "a conditioned response to the sexual imagery that barrages women in this society" (Nichols et al. 1982, p.137). In this model,

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<sup>154</sup> She does not give any sources for this claim and I have not come across it elsewhere. It appears that she is using S/M relationship as a synonym for an unconsensual abusive one.



feminists brand other feminists traumatized, fragile, automatons of patriarchy with no interiority or agency, an assessment that infuriated some SM dykes.<sup>155</sup> Even if one is inclined towards SM, repressing these desires is compulsory, and exploring one's own, inner, pre-liberation patriarchal oppression with other feminists can help. In other words: analyse and criticise the desires, but don't eroticise them or enjoy them. How eerily reminiscent of 1950s-style anti-gay advice.<sup>156</sup>

#### 4.5 Finding a middle ground?

It is common to see writers lament the polarisation the issue has caused and the lack of reasoned discussion, but, in the same breath, utter something absolutist or patronising about SM. One clear example of this is Walker-Crawford in *Against Sadomasochism* (1982). "Although there are essential differences among wimmin who call themselves feminists", she acknowledges, "this rivalry for the position of 'politically correct' has divided us. It has made it difficult, if not impossible, for us to see and hear our similarities, or to learn from them" (Walker-Crawford 1982, p.149). The next paragraph goes on to claim that sadomasochism "promotes behavior that is destructive, clotting, and *definitely anti-feminist*" [emphasis mine](Walker-Crawford 1982, p.149).<sup>157</sup> Similarly, from the "other side", Lisa Duggan wrote in 1995,

As we naïvely set out to open up questions which we believed antiporn activists had either sidelined or closed for discussion, we expected a debate, but not an assault. Borrowing rhetorical devices from Cold War anticommunists, antiporners defined all

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<sup>155</sup> One wrote, "I am tired of being accused by hysterical dykes who beat up their lovers of being a rapist/brutalizer/male-identified oppressor of battered womyn. I was a battered womyn for years & claim the right to release & transform the pain & fear of those experiences any way I damn well please" (Juicy 1982, p.30).

<sup>156</sup> I only noticed upon rereading this that I too, perform a temporal gesture, placing the critiques about agential into a 1950s pre-emancipatory past. Rather than rephrase, I want to leave it here as an example of the desire to be placed in a more liberated present, a desire that a history can never fulfill, and a desire, as I mentioned in my theoretical framework, I strive to be conscious of.

<sup>157</sup> Walker-Crawford includes a footnote to define "clotting", which I include here for completeness: "Clotting- When we or someone else stops or blocks the flow of vital substances, i.e. blood, energy" (Walker-Crawford 1982, p.152. This also illustrates her holistic, spiritual view of the body. In another footnote she names the Lucumi religion (an offshoot of Nigerian Yoruba theory) as inspiration for her language (ibid).

dissent on sexual issues as ‘collaboration’ (in this case, with ‘the patriarchy’) and treason (against feminism, or against all women) (Duggan & Hunter 2006, p.5).

This kind of discourse, while seemingly asking for understanding, actually further enflames the situation, preventing productive debate both in the past and in the present. Thus the “middle way” position (some version of “SM is sometimes good, sometimes bad, depending”) is not so much wrong as trivially right; the more interesting questions are: does a sexual-political movement need to define “good” sex in order to function? Must, and should, sexual practices be treated in historical terms, as progressive or retrogressive?

#### **4.6 Struggles over (re)defining “lesbian” and “feminist”**

Not only were the boundaries good and bad sex being marked in the sand, but also the limits of “lesbian” and “feminist”. Scholar Ann Russo describes being told, on asking for further discussion on a “pro-sex” position, that “you’re either a feminist or you are not. You have to draw the line and make a decision. If you do not agree that pornography is wrong, then you are not a feminist” (Russo 1987, p.104). Ti-Grace Atkinson addressed SM lesbians in a speech included in *Against Sadomasochism*: “You distort feminism unconscionably” (Atkinson 1981, p.92). Writer Susan Helenius made her position clear in the title of her article on SM in *Lesbian Tide* “SM: the boundaries of feminism” (1977). Dorothy Allison remarks that after Barnard, “all of a sudden, everything I have done for 20 years has been redefined in their [anti-pornography feminist’s] terms, and the terms were very clear. I was a shill for the pornographers, I was a pornographer. Everything that I had ever written about sexual deviance and incest was suddenly redefined as a pornographic, monstrous text” (Allison 2007, p.53). We can start to feel the distress that these kinds of definitional battle enact.

All of this leads us back to Hollibaugh’s questions at Barnard from the previous chapter: “Are we creating a political movement that we can no longer belong to if we don’t

feel our desires fit a model of proper feminist sex?” (Hollibaugh 1989, p.403). Diana H. Russell, an editor of and contributor to *Against Sadomasochism*, has gone as far as to state that Samois is “about the most contra-feminist, anti-political and bourgeois stance that I can imagine” (Russell 1982, p.172). Lorena Leigh Saxe notes how in *Coming to Power*, the “use of sadism to escape from the *feelings* of female powerlessness” is a common theme (Saxe 1992, p.63). This, she argues, “can be contrasted with the goal of actually liberating woman and Lesbians from oppression” (ibid.).<sup>158</sup> These quotes seem to suggest that SM is a *political stance* rather than a desire.

Within the anti-SM positions of critics like Russell and Saxe, there is no epistemological room for a pro-feminist, extremely political, non-bourgeois sadomasochist who is also a feminist activist involved in actions to fight women’s oppression in society. SM is positioned as the opposite of women’s liberation. Such extreme statements indicate that these debates were not really about the morality of the personal practice of SM, but instead about the power of definition, visibility and inclusion in the lesbian feminist movement. Conversely, pro-sex feminists, in labelling themselves in this way, created another kind of feminist who was, by implication, “anti-sex”. But, as Amy Hoffman explains, “the anti-porn people were not “anti-sex” (I hope) – they were against what they saw as exploitation” (pers. comm, June 1, 2015). Within this dichotomy, there is no room for an anti-porn feminist who was pro-sex, as I explain further in chapter 5.

What we see here is a fundamental battle to control the discourse about lesbian identity and lesbian sexual practice, exacted by different actors each with the goal of strengthening the feminist movement in the way they saw as best. As Nancy Hartsock stated (in a critique of women’s absence in Foucault),

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<sup>158</sup> Indeed, this argument is in conflict with some basic second wave principles of, for example, consciousness raising, a key part of early second wave feminism. What was this practice if not liberating women’s feelings, women’s consciousness, from oppression?

we need to develop our understanding of difference by creating a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference (Hartsock 1987, p.158).

– and, I would add, not threatened by it. For Judith Butler at least, this notion of space for difference allows for the possibility for queer to be put to its best use politically and socially, “it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (1993, p.19). Thus identity (and perverseness) can exist as an amorphous force.

For Dorothy Allison, founder of the Lesbian Sex Mafia, the sex wars and SM debates are “a struggle for who, in fact, defines feminism and what, in fact, is feminism [...] they [lesbian feminists] felt as if their feminism was being stolen” (Allison 2007, pp.49, 55). Ardill and Sullivan agree “it's a struggle over definitions and the power to define” (1986 34). They recount that after a meeting at the LLGC all were invited to the lesbian-only lounge, but the SM faction's presence was questioned by the group Lesbians Against Sadomasochism

(LASM).<sup>159</sup> “By this point feminism and lesbianism were claimed as LASM’s own” (p.46), and lesbian sadomasochists fall outside the definition of feminist.

Describing a collection of lesbian erotica, Lewis and Adler write,

By successfully blurring the boundaries of what is or is not sm (5 out of 12 stories contain acts which could be construed as sm), the text allows the reader to enjoy what might otherwise prompt an anxiety about being turned on by sm. This is, in part, a defusion of sm’s claim to centre stage by redefining as neutral acts that have become discursively constructed as sm, for example, anal penetration and fisting (Lewis and Adler 1994, p.438).

Thus, the battle over definitions is not solely over what counts as feminism, but also what counts as SM; suggesting that it is not specific acts (such as spanking) that are inherently wrong or “un-feminist”, but they can become so through discursive constructions from control of mainstream feminists. Again, in the same short piece, Lewis and Adler raise this concern, that even those who do not practice any kind of SM behaviour (not even so-called grey area activities), feel they can only define themselves in relation to an SM ‘norm’.

The impact of sm could hardly have been clearer to us than, when writing this article, we were unable to find appropriate terms to describe the community of lesbians who

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<sup>159</sup> A similar event happened at the Women’s Building in San Francisco (Vasquez does not mention the date). Samois’ request to meet there compromised the safety of the space for some women. “And in the case of Samois, people felt that having women in there who embraced sadomasochism made it unsafe for people who saw sadomasochism as a sort of emulation of slavery”, said Carmen Vasquez the director of the centre in an oral history (Vasquez 2015, pp.45–6). “Gayle Rubin was treated as a pariah”, she remembers, “and we actually had to face deep, hard discussions at the building about whether or not Samois, I think could meet” (ibid., p.62). Gayle Rubin also describes this incident in “The Lavender Menace”, noting that the Women’s Building had in the past opened their space both to men’s and non-feminist organisations (1982b, pp.212–3), suggesting that SM lesbians are less “women” than men and non-feminists. Finally, the Building allowed them in, but only on conditions, including no “offensive” behaviour. Califia writes that when pressed, they explained that Samois members could not “could not lead each other around on leashes, whip each other, or have sex in the hallways or bathrooms” (1982, p.277). Vasquez recalls, “even though I completely and totally related to and understood the feelings that some people—and I shared some of those feelings—of walking into a bar and seeing a black woman with a collar on being led around by a white woman. It’s like, you know what? I don’t think so. This really—I can’t go there. And could I go into—you know, could I engage in sadomasochism, particularly if there’s that sort of a racial difference? I don’t know. But intellectually and politically, I felt that the collective had no business saying no” (2015, pp.141–2). This incident too shows the ignorance of many about SM practices – Samois’ meetings were political and social; play parties happened elsewhere, in people’s homes and at the Catacombs leather bar (Califia 1982, p.265) (although I suppose some sex in the bathrooms might occur, like at any feminist meeting). Again and again there is the assumption that SM lesbians have more promiscuous sex and less long term, committed relationships, and that this is a reason to criticise them. The issue of space and physical inclusion has come up again with the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (known as “Mich Fest”). In 1979 Samois held a well-attended workshop, but in later years their right to be there was questioned, Samois (Ben Power, pers. comm. May 14, 2015). The relationship of Mich Fest and SM is another which deserves at least a book length study.

do not engage in sm without relying on terms which were themselves referents of sm. Unhappy with the derogatory sm term ‘vanilla,’ the only alternatives were equally negative nomenclatures ‘anti-sm’ or ‘non-sm.’ The pervasive dominance of sm terminology within the debate about violent sex, like sm's presentation of itself as a hip new lifestyle inhabited by ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’ rather than ‘sadists’ and ‘masochists,’ belies the actual violence inherent in sm discourse and practice (Lewis and Adler 1994, p.435).

By controlling the discourse, they suggest, SM dykes downplay the (perceived) harm of SM. This certainly resonates with Hall’s work discussed above,<sup>160</sup> and yet, can a marginalised minority really have the power to control the discourse (and thus knowledge) around SM so completely? How can they speak solely of “tops” while some in the SM community refer to themselves as tops, others are mistresses, sadists, dominants, daddies, and a whole range of identities too numerous to list, and too diverse to be represented simply as “top”?<sup>161</sup> The editors of *Power of Desire* pushed the question of struggles over defining feminism even further, suggesting that,

perhaps the issues we have chosen to work on have disguised and deflected deeper concerns [...] for example, the debates about lesbianism and sadomasochism do not have to do with those issues very much at all, but rather with the more profound and general problem of erotic boundaries and our own stake in them (Snitow et al. 1983, p.41).

Thus it is “erotic boundaries” which are being challenged, not just politics.

If the discussion remains about who can own the term “feminist”, however, many important issues are sidelined. What about discussions of racism, or the use of swastikas in SM play? At the Speakout after the Barnard Conference in 1982, Cherríe Moraga raised the point of what conversations *don’t* happen when battles rage and conversations fail:

lesbian s/m has never been critically examined in any sensitive and realistic way, which could be useful to its feminist practitioners and to other feminists who simply

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<sup>160</sup> His discussion of “freedom fighters” vs. “terrorists” in the Palestinian context seems particularly relevant here (Hall 2006, p.167).

<sup>161</sup> This is reminiscent of the ways in which some spoke about “gay” identity as a monolithic identity that could be copy-pasted from the present onto the past, before important interventions by scholars like George Chauncey (1994) who, in his *Gay New York*, taught us that we could accurately speak just of “homosexuals”, but had to recognise the various labels and identities under which men engaged in same sex behaviours, such as fairies, wolves, hustlers, inverters, people “like that” who do not fit into the neat homo/hetero binary.

want a right to their sexual desire, and at the same time, understand what that desire means in a racist/sexist and violent culture (qtd. in Freccero 1990, 312–3).

These questions, as I outlined in my limitation section, still need exploring today.

What an overview of these critiques of SM shows is that violence (emotional, social and sometimes physical) has been perpetuated against women in the name of anti-violence against women. Rubin states,

I looked at sex ‘deviants,’ and frankly they didn’t strike me as the apotheosis of patriarchy. On the contrary, they seemed like people with a whole set of problems of their own, generated by a dominant system of sexual politics that treated them very badly (Butler & Rubin 1994, p.78).

I posit that both s/m and butch/femme have been accused of being pre-emancipatory embodiments of patriarchal oppression in their enactments of power play. The specific ways in which these practices have been critiqued illuminate wider, postmodern anxieties about identity and the power of definition. While entanglements of discourse, power and knowledge are not necessarily predicated on fact, these portrayals of s/m and butch/femme display a profound example of how certain acts can be assigned public (and identity-based) meanings by a mainstream lesbian discourse that, perversely, considers itself oppressed by the minority discourse. Many of the critiques, as we have seen, misrepresent SM in order to promote their own positions. In the next chapter, I explore the ways in which pro-sex feminists have attempted to build their own feminist communities, including publications whose pages were not entirely free of critiques of SM, but provided a safe and mostly respectful space to explore SM in depth – not just talking about it as a concept, but showing it, in stories, in pictures and in politics.

## Chapter 5

### Pro-Sex Voices Enter the Feminist Fray



Figure 32 Amy Hoffman's (one of *Bad Attitude*'s founding editors) "Anti-fantasies" editorial in an early issue of *Bad Attitude* (Hoffman 1985, p.3).



*'You little bitch' she yelled, and slapped my ass, hard. 'You know I am stronger than you! You can only win with your femme tricks. Don't you dare try to scratch me or you'll really be sorry, you cat.'*

*We had been rolling around from bed to floor to armchair for close to half an hour, and I knew we were approaching the delicious moment when she would overpower me.*

*'Ow, Ow,' I cried. I attempted to leap up and throw her onto the bed, but she caught my wrists in one hand behind me and kneed me in the back of my legs, so I found myself in a praying position in front of the armchair. I began to whimper in apparent terror.*

*'You're OK, aren't you?' she whispered in my ear.*

*I sighed. 'Did I say anything that sounded like a safe word?'*

*'Alright then, you wimp!' she resumed loudly, and gave my tuchis another slap.*

*'You'll get what you deserve for fighting me!' I heard a metallic clank on the floor, and she ran something cold and hard down the crack of my ass.*

*'The cuffs,' I shrieked happily. 'I don't deserve the cuffs!'*

*'You'll deserve whatever I give you, and like it,' she crooned menacingly, and continued sliding the cold metal between my dripping vulvae. I panted and moaned.*

*'That's enough out of you,' she said. 'The cuffs it is.' I wiggled around a little, reluctant to struggle too hard lest she lose her grip on me at this delicate moment.*

*'Huh,' she said in a puzzled voice. I wondered if we were now going to play some new game. That my struggle was a sham was becoming embarrassing obvious as the seconds dragged on. 'Quit squirming so much,' she continued, still apparently out of character. 'Have you had trouble with the lock on these things before?'*

*She let go of me completely and I turned around and watched her fiddle with the little key,*

*'Usually they work fine,' I told her. 'Let me take a look.' I worked the key around in the lock, with no more success than she had. 'They really do seem to be stuck. I wonder if I got K-Y in them or something.'*

*'Too bad,' she said, 'they look like they were good ones.'*

*'Yeah,' I said, disappointed. 'Only the best for my girls.'*

*'Listen,' she said helpfully. 'I bet we could take them down to that leather store and get them fixed.'*

*I looked around for my pants.*

*'Not a bad idea. Why don't we walk over there now. It's kind of a nice day out.'*

*'I'll just take a quick shower, alright?'*

*'Sure, but hurry up. They probably close around 5:00.'*

*I finished putting my clothes on, and we strolled arm-in-arm out the door.*

- Amy Hoffman, "Anti-Fantasies" in *Bad Attitude*'s Winter 1985 issue.<sup>162</sup>

I begin this chapter, which will explore discourses about SM from those who were supporters of (or at least sympathetic to) feminist sadomasochism, with an extract from a story I am incredibly fond of, by Amy Hoffman. And if it was not clear enough the magazine's title runs across the top of the page three times in a row: BAD ATTITUDE BAD ATTITUDE BAD ATTITUDE. In the eyes of some feminists, these women have a bad attitude.

Hoffman names her piece "Anti-Fantasies", and with no small dose of deadpan humour, she describes hot fantasies somehow gone wrong (or gone realistic?). In doing so, she both lampoons traditional, heterosexual erotic stories, and subverts expectations about what a lesbian erotic story looks like. It reminds the reader that, yes, we read erotic short

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<sup>162</sup> Hoffman, 1985, p. 3.

stories for fantasy outlet – they do not have to represent reality, and in fact when they do, the outcome is nothing short of hilarious, and sweet. Hoffman shows the reality behind the fantasy, the checking in with one’s lover (“‘You’re OK, aren’t you?’ she whispered in my ear”), the mundane technical difficulties of sex (“‘They really do seem to be stuck. I wonder if I got K-Y in them or something’”) and also, the fact that sometimes, it’s just not the right time for sex (and this too belongs in a lesbian sex magazine). We might consider erotic stories in this context as activism in and of themselves: they show rather than tell the pleasures of SM.

Legal scholar Ummni Khan notes that her analysis of the anti-SM literature is at least twice the length of her pro-SM section (Khan 2008, p.168).<sup>163</sup> What Khan does not consider, but what takes centre stage in this chapter, are lesbian sex magazines like *On Our Backs* and *Bad Attitude*, which, although different in size, location and content, both have the title of the first lesbian sex magazines in America.<sup>164</sup> If Khan *had* considered them, her pro-SM section may have been a lot longer, as discussions in the letters pages and portrayals of SM desires form an important part of the free sexuality these magazines espouse.<sup>165</sup>

These lesbian sex magazines, as well as SM dykes’ publications, were refused by some feminist bookstores on the grounds of being oppressive. Reading stories like Hoffman’s, or looking at centrefolds like *On Our Back*’s “Bulldagger of the Season” (see below), it is hard for me, looking back, to imagine how they could be threatening to lesbian

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<sup>163</sup> A quick look at my page count shows that I am guilty of devoting more pages to the anti-voices too, but only by a thousand words or so.

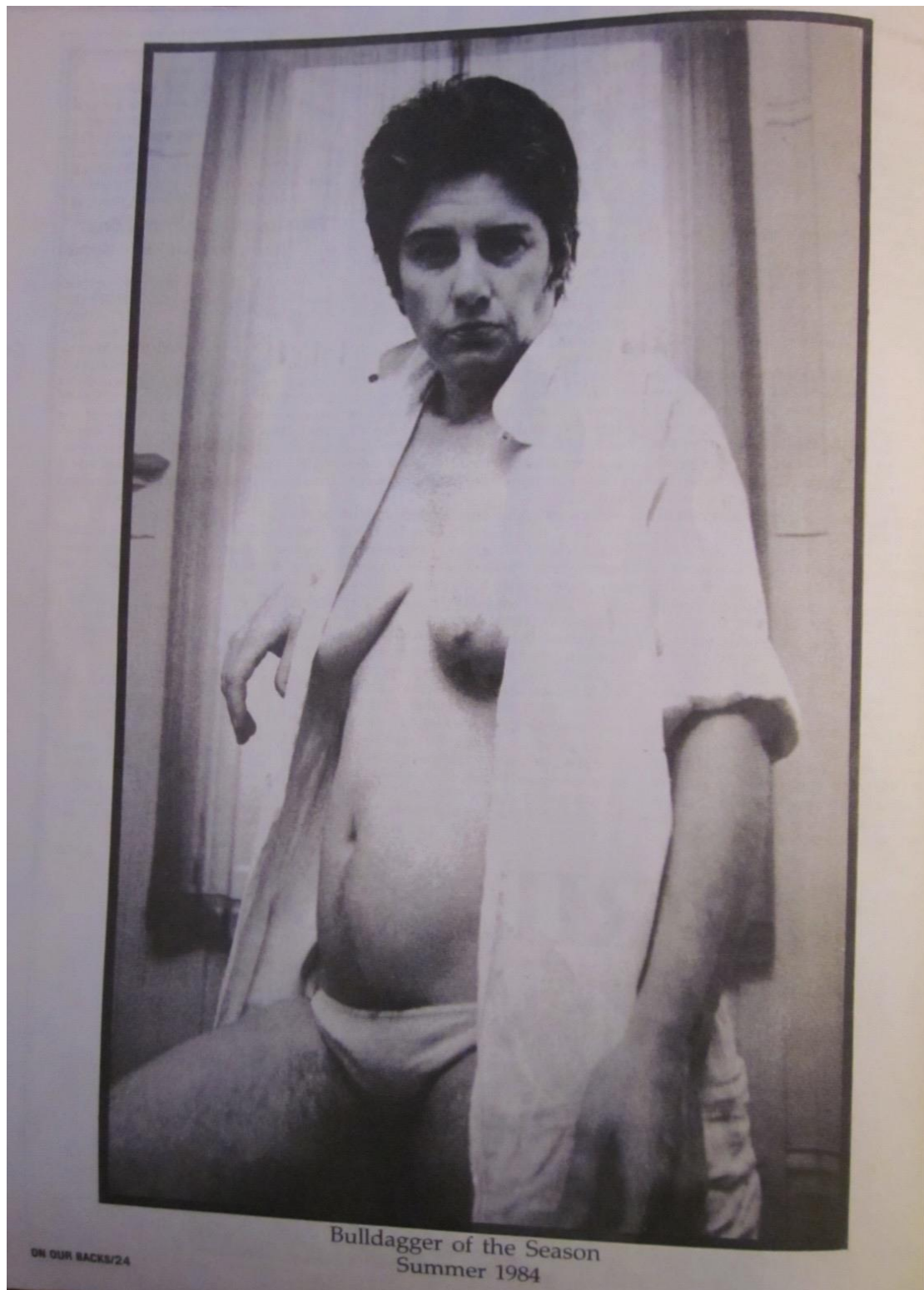
<sup>164</sup> Khan focuses her analysis solely on Califia’s pro-SM text, first published in *The Advocate* (and then elsewhere), a mainstream gay publication (Califia 1981; Califia 1979), SM lesbians’ own books and erotica (Samois 1979; Samois 1981; Califia 1988a) or theoretic academic articles (Rubin 1984). This makes it not only very Samois-heavy (Rubin and Califia were both Samois members, and even lovers for a time), but also Califia heavy! This slants discussions to a particular brand of US West Coast sex positive feminism enacted by Califia, which in turn does not reflect other member’s of Samois’ beliefs – in fact, Samois disintegrated over infighting (Campbell 2012, pp.51–3, 60). See Campbell’s work for an excellent (and unorthodox) look at Samois’ own records and piecing together of its downfall (ibid. pp.50-61).

<sup>165</sup> For a more detailed description of both these magazines in their early years, see Kayla Ginsburg’s wonderful Honours dissertation, *On Our Backs with a Bad Attitude: The History of the First Lesbian Sex Magazines* from Smith College (2013b).

feminists or uphold patriarchal values, but I also keep in mind that its critics usually cited the most extreme examples, such as the use of Nazi symbols.<sup>166</sup> This chapter follows the trajectory of lesbian SM from the perspective that rejects readings of SM as inherently damaging.

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<sup>166</sup> The WAP pamphlet at Barnard in 1982, for example, names Nazi and Jew, and black slave/white master scenes in particular, fantasies that even some SM players might have had trouble with (p.2, Allison Papers, Box 21). I am interested in exploring this more. Robin Bauer (2008) published a study looking at this in contemporary queer BDSM people in the US and Western Europe.



**Figure 33** Honey Lee Cottrell photographed by lesbian photographer Tee Corinne, “Bulldagger of the Season” (*On Our Backs*, 1984, 1(1), p.24).

**DAGGER DATA SHEET**

NAME: HONEY LEE COTRELL

BUST: 36" WAIST: 29" HIPS: 39"

HEIGHT: 5'5" WEIGHT: 135

BIRTHDATE: 1-16-46

BIRTHPLACE: JACKSON, MICHIGAN

AMBITIONS: PRINT MY COLOR NEGATIVES 16X20, MAKE PORN FILMS,  
LIVE IN ANOTHER COUNTRY FOR 15 YEARS

TURN-ONS: MY WOODEN DILDOE, THE WAY MY GIRLFRIEND GIVES  
IT UP, MY POCKET PEPPER MILL, MOTORCYCLES, TATOOS

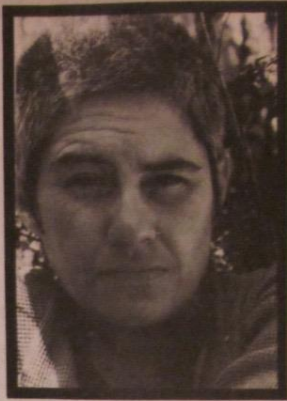
TURN-OFFS: ANDREA DWORKIN'S HAIR, ORAL SEX, THE  
REFRIGERATOR WITH ROTTEN FOOD IN IT


FAVORITE MOVIES: ANYTHING WITH LIZ TAYLOR, "HEART LIKE  
A WHEEL"


IDEAL WOMAN: TALL, SMART, TALKATIVE, PRETTY


FAVORITE PLACE: AT HOME IN THE AFTERNOON

SECRET FANTASY: THE BACK SEAT OF A ROLLS ROYCE ON  
FUR-LINED SEATS AFTER A PICNIC



 FIRST PERM, 6 YRS. OLD

 POST-PERM, 1952

 1972 HIPPIE, I'm 26

ON OUR BACKS/25

Figure 34 "Dagger data sheet" accompanying the centrefold in (*On Our Backs*, 1984, 1(1), p.25).

First, I explain the origins and characteristics of some sex positive magazines that gave SM dykes the space to express their fantasies (or anti-fantasies), whatever they might be. I then look at the classic work on SM from a feminist lesbian perspective, *Coming to*

*Power* (1981). I go on to note how, to use legal scholar Khan's phrase "there is pleasure in rebellion" (Khan 2008, p.73). I explore how these magazines were not only a forum to express SM desires, but also served to connect and educate, make fun, and to discuss the ethics of desire.



## 5.1 Lesbian sex magazines getting on their feet

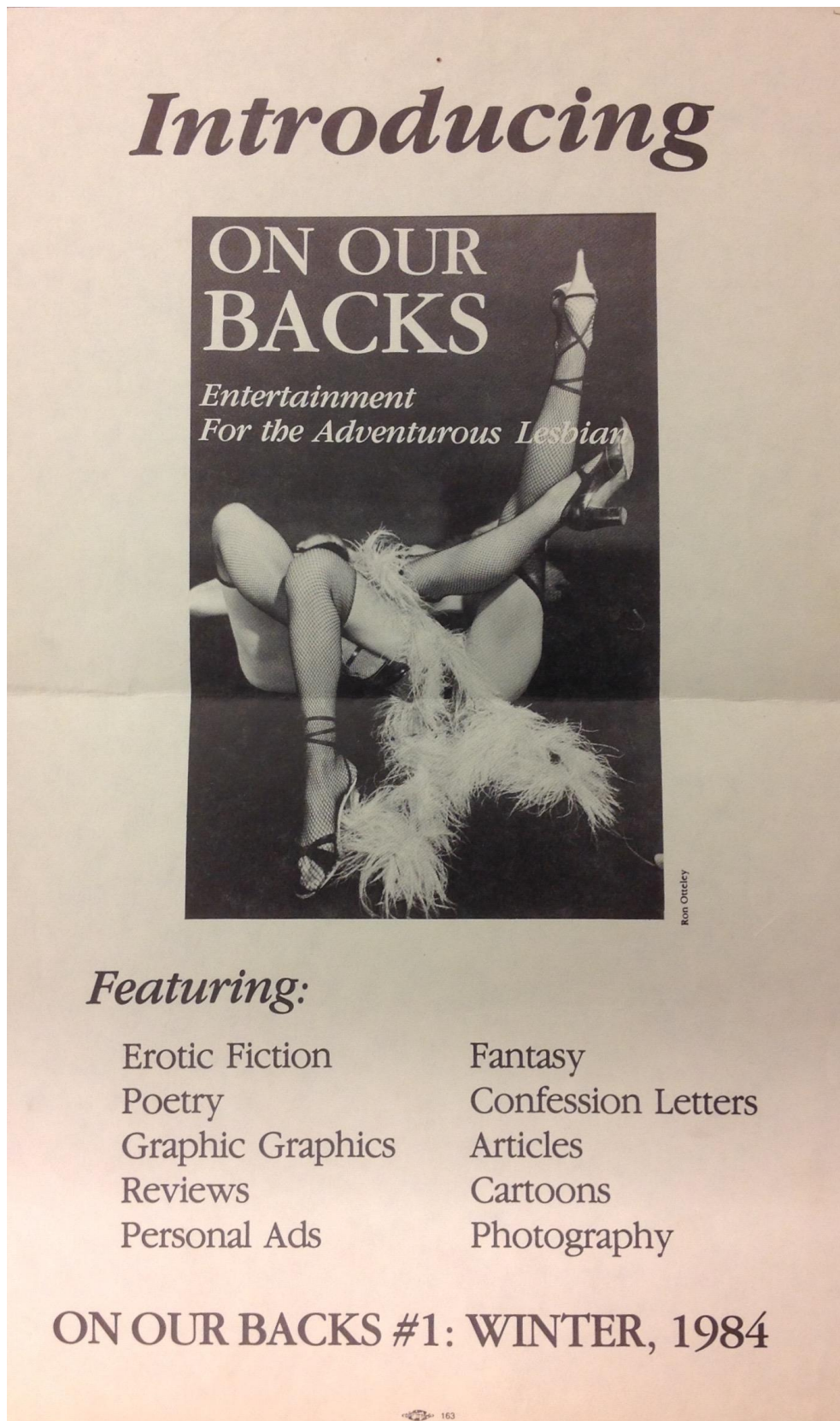


Figure 35 *On Our Backs* poster for the first issue (Allison Papers, Box 21).



In the midst of the sex wars, as the media coverage of the Barnard conference (see chapter 3) displays, much of mainstream feminist media was openly hostile to speaking about lesbian sexuality that was “politically incorrect”. While there had been essays here and there, events organised from time to time, and the pro-sex anthologies *Coming to Power* (1981) and *The Powers of Desire* (1983), there was no consistent, dedicated and accessible forum for expressions of explicit, feminist, lesbian sexuality.

That is, until the exciting year of 1984 when not one but two lesbian sex magazines burst onto the lesbian literary scene and put lesbian lust, lesbian bodies, lesbian desires, fantasies, kinks and dislikes (like Andrea Dworkin’s hair, see Figure 34) in the spotlight.<sup>167</sup> These magazines were highly political and in response to controversies within the feminist movement: The first issue of *Bad Attitude* includes a subscription form where one can tick the box “Yes! I want to be part of the exciting sexuality debate!” (1984, n.p.).

This was not done without trepidation and false starts. *On Our Backs* took years to get on its feet. Amy Hoffman told me how “the first issue of *Bad Attitude* was actually an insert into an issue of *Gay Community News*, and the *GCN* collective made a deliberate decision to support *Bad Attitude*, even if it opened *GCN* up to criticism or even lawsuits. (That didn’t happen!)” (Hoffman, pers. comm. May 1, 2015).

Lest I exaggerate their impact or reach, it must be noted that neither of these magazines had the distribution levels of other, more established, national LGBT papers. In fact, as Amy Hoffman recalls, “Some ‘anti-porn’ people criticized publications like *On Our Backs* and *Bad Attitude* as somehow capitalist & part of a ‘billion dollar porn industry’—

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<sup>167</sup> At least three more like-minded publications existed: *The Power Exchange* (The Outcasts’ newsletter from San Francisco), *Cathexis: a Journal for S/M Lesbians*, and *Outrageous Women* (Urania’s magazine). However, I am not choosing to focus on them here. The lesbian sex magazines, while extremely SM friendly, catered to many different sexual desires, and thus the reactions in the letters to the editor pages and opinion pieces are diverse and do not all come from an inherently “pro-SM” standpoint. *Gay Community News* had also published texts about SM before and continued to be open to controversial topics (Pers.Comm, May 7, 2015).

which always made me laugh because if anything we lost money, and then gave away the publication” (Hoffman, pers. comm. May 1, 2015). Nevertheless, some copies of the magazines even sold out (and are thus missing from some archives and hard to get a hold of) – the demand for the material most certainly existed, even if distribution channels were limited and print runs for *Bad Attitude* were probably only around 500 per issue (but *On Our Backs* was larger and national) (Ginsburg 2013b, p.12).<sup>168</sup>

And lest I exaggerate about their philosophical innovation, these folks were not the first to prioritise lesbian sexual pleasure over politics. Almost ten years earlier, in 1975, the nomadic sisters had written:

Anything that is safe and adds to woman’s enjoyment should be explored as a viable possibility... we wish to reiterate our recommendation for enjoying all those things which feel good to you and your partner. Uptightness or moral judgment regarding any technique that is enjoyed by women can only add to the already long years of sexual oppression of women (Nomadic Sisters 1976, p.31).

Yet they had not gone as far as to produce their own erotic material. Pat Califia’s *Sapphistry* (1980) is a non-judgmental and inclusive sex manual of sorts. However, it is largely different from a magazine format where art, advertisements, personal ads and letters to the editor can represent a range of voices and images subject to change and critique not quite in real time, but issue to issue. Readers could express all manner of emotions in the letter pages, with responses coming from editors, authors and then new readers again – their disgust, joy, and confusion filling the letter pages for others to read and react to.

Myrna Elana and Debi Sundahl, the editors and publishers of *On Our Backs* magazine, “entertainment for the adventurous lesbian”, declared 1984 the “YEAR OF THE LUSTFUL LESBIAN!” (Elana & Sundahl 1984). They finished their editorial with the cry, “Long Live Lesbian Lust!”. Their emphasis on lust was especially significant in a climate

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<sup>168</sup> Although, as with other lesbian and feminist papers at the time, many women did not buy them directly from women’s bookstores, as not all had access to one in their area. Some shared copies through photocopying, others subscribed by mail order.

that continued to vaunt political lesbianism (see 2.2; 2.3). Gayle Rubin complained that she

did not like the way in which lesbians motivated by lust, or lesbians who were invested in butch/femme roles, were treated as inferior residents of the lesbian continuum, while some women who never had sexual desire for women were granted more elevated status (Butler & Rubin 1994, pp.74–75).

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@ \$3.00  
I am over 18 years of age. I understand that this is sexually explicit material, which I want to receive for my own use.  
.....  
(Signature) \_\_\_\_\_

*Bad Attitude* • Winter 1985 • Page Twenty-Three

Figure 36 The advertisements in *Bad Attitude*, 1984 (1(3), p.23), show how pro-sex and SM publications were linked; such connections were crucial as mainstream feminists publications refused to take SM-themed advertisements (Photo by K. Ginsburg). They were viewed as grouped together at the time too (Kulp 1985, p.16).

Sometimes they took things maybe a little far – *Bad Attitude* had a “table of cunttext”, for example – but it was nevertheless a much needed intervention that can be explained by the contested context from which it emerged. Librarian Sara Beth writes,

*On Our Backs* should be read as a reactionary document. Yes, it inspired its own reactionary responses, but it was created as a reaction to the extreme anti-sex rhetoric of *off our backs*. *On Our Backs* was hyperbolic the way reactionary discourse tends to be (Sara Beth 2012).

While some, as I explained in chapter 4, saw SM lesbians trapped in a backward, patriarchal time warp, Katherine Davis suggests the very opposite in her introduction to *Coming to Power*.<sup>169</sup> In her estimation, lesbian SM is a “scary skeleton hidden in the corner of our otherwise cleaned up closets” (Davis 1981, p.7). In other words, she believes that it is well overdue for lesbian sadomasochists to “come out of the closet” as sadomasochists as well as lesbians, to truly leave the closet free of baggage (to mix metaphors somewhat). Gayle Rubin had already noted in an interview in *Gay Community News* back in 1981 that while coming out as gay and coming out as SM are similar processes, being open about sadomasochistic desires has been much more difficult because of the lack of community support and the proliferation of misinformation, as well as the shame surrounding the topic that prevented generational exchange of learning.

S/M culture is a lot like gay culture – all the things that our ancestors had to learn are very hard to transmit to the next generation. Our society inhibits the transmission and tries to keep people from hearing that information (Weschler, 1981, n.p, clipping from ONE SM file).<sup>170</sup>

It is clear that by this time SM exists as a category comparable to that of “the homosexual”, but also that it is hindered by what Rubin identifies here the damage that silencing

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<sup>169</sup> It is interesting to ponder the connections between the emphasis on lust – a phenomenon of the immediate, of the now – with discourses of temporality i.e. naming SM as either the most enlightened, or the least enlightened, state – the rescuing discourse Love talks, which I address in chapter 1.

<sup>170</sup> Both parts of the Weschler interview were cut out and pasted onto a sheet of A4 paper so I was not able to ascertain the page numbers.

discussions about sex can have. The interviewer Weschler herself states that, “the discussions around s/m that Pat and Gayle and the rest of the Samoïs women have helped initiate” affected her profoundly in helping her to identify and acknowledge her fantasies *as SM* (ibid.). The discursive proliferation around SM within lesbian feminism, in part because it greatly exaggerated the importance and prominence of SM, had the effect of soliciting many lesbians and feminists to adopt a sexual identity around SM that they may not have otherwise felt compelled to engage with.

Three years later, as one letter writer in *On Our Backs* wrote, “I’m happy to see someone has finally done it. A magazine for the adventurous lesbian is just what we need” (Letters, *On Our Backs*, 1.2, Beth, Philadelphia, PA, p.3).

While some of the editors of and contributors to these magazines were personally interested in or involved in the practices depicted in their magazines, others simply believed in freedom of expression, including for SM lesbians.<sup>171</sup> As such, the range of desires expressed was incredibly varied; lesbians were coming out of the closet, and not just for SM desires. One lesbian can barely contain herself and grossly overuses exclamation points to express her excitement:

Your new publication is outrageous! Wonderful! Erotic! Stimulating! Fun! And, just what I’ve been waiting for! I thought I was the only dyke in the whole damn world who loves erotica! What I’d give to see a lesbian-only strip show! And, I will! Guess this means I’m out of the closet again, doesn’t it! (Linda, Pacific Grove, CA, p.5).

What emerges strongly from reading readers’ responses is the sense that the magazines were

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<sup>171</sup> Though, as chapter 4 (especially 4.3) exemplifies, there is often a tension between these two motives. Looking back, Hoffman’s appraisal of her involvement is not so positive. She calls it a “sort of porno magazine” that was text-heavy, because it was for lesbians, and because of her girlfriend at the time (Patton, *BA*’s co-founder), it also included “dense theoretical analyses of why such stories, written by and for lesbians, were unique and significant. The problem was, they weren’t really. Secretly, I found them embarrassing. It was amazing how many people wanted to be pushed around by teachers, camp counselors, or basketball coaches [...]” (Hoffman 2007, p.116). I share this here to illustrate that the perspectives of even those producing pro-SM materials was highly varied.

filling a crucial gap in the market; women had been waiting for magazines like this and they could not quite believe it was truly happening. The sense of some lesbians' isolation is palpable, as well as their joy at finding others like them in the pages of these magazines. But of course, not everyone was satisfied.

There is no better illustration of the immeasurable diversity in sexual tastes and politics in the lesbian community than the letters page of the second issue of *On Our Backs*. First, the editors included a range of positive responses. Beth tells us "I enjoyed the stories so much it prompted me to take hand to clit and relieve the tension" (p.3); L&K from Arizona loved the content but hated the name, and asked that they "keep on cumming with all the pussy galore, any & all fetishes and raunch – but please hold down the pain threshold". They end with the message "clits up!" (p.3). Another reader is absolutely appalled to have received the mail unrequested,

For years we as lesbian-feminists have been fighting male pornography. This struggle is not only for lesbians but for all women and children who are subjected to sexual abuse. It shocks and abhors me to find that women have stooped to the same methods of selling [...] I hope NEVER to see something like what you are selling in the name of lesbian literature again (Donna 1984, p.3).

Then, they include a series of excerpts of which I include a few below:

More crotch shots! – BT, Chicago  
 Less crotch shots! – JL, Los Angeles  
 Please, more SM everything – CT, Norwalk  
 Lighten up on the s/m – TT, Atlanta  
 (Letters, *On Our Backs*, (1)2, p.5).

That the editors made these selections shows they knew they would not be able to please everyone, and they did not seem bothered by this. It also indicates that readers felt confident both in asking for what they wanted to see and letting them know what they did not like, but without the animosity seen in *off our backs*, for example.

## 5.2 Rural connections

The isolation that Linda from Pacific Grove expresses is a different kind to that of K of Alabama, a mostly closeted lesbian who lived in a small rural town in the southeast where “people would just as soon shoot queers as to get to know them” (p.5). Her letter shows the real lack of information available to rural lesbians, or those without access to lesbian communities or lesbian literature. K. asks a series of earnest questions about the contents of the last issue, including asking whether the butch centrefold (referring to Honey Lee Cottrell) was a real one for “perusal-excitement” or “a satire on heterosexual centerfolds” (K from Wandiver AL 1984, p.5). She wondered whether or not someone attracted to a butch might as well be attracted to a man, and whether pleasure could really be gained from sucking off dildos, and finally some questions about SM,

What exactly is a leather store and what do you do with the articles? – the chains? – what are s/m techniques? Do people really use ‘hankies’? What is a shit scene, victorian scene, piercer, bondage? (K from Wandiver AL 1984, p.5).

The editor replies to her respectfully and helpfully (“Thank you for your questions. Will try our best to answer them”), including more recommendations for further reading (*Coming to Power*), and a passed on message from Honey Lee’s girlfriend (“she would never find her lover’s qualities in a member of the male species”) (p.5).<sup>172</sup> In this exchange, we can see not only the isolation of some dykes who in some ways, missed out on the sex wars, or only followed it sporadically in print.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore, we see the educational value of the magazine alongside its sexual value, as well as an open, safe environment in which to ask questions and discuss controversial topics.

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<sup>172</sup> Although, she does not answer whether or not women actually used the hankies. The fact that *On Our Backs* sold them suggests there was a good chance, although I have no data about how many were bought (see **Figure 37**).

<sup>173</sup> For these women, perhaps the notion of a lesbian sadomasochist took much longer to crystalize, or was thought of SM identity only belonging to city women and one needed to go to the city to claim it, just as Kath Weston beautiful describes lesbian identity formation and imagined communities in “Get thee to a big city” (1998). Oral histories (as Weston did for her project) would be particular fruitful here.

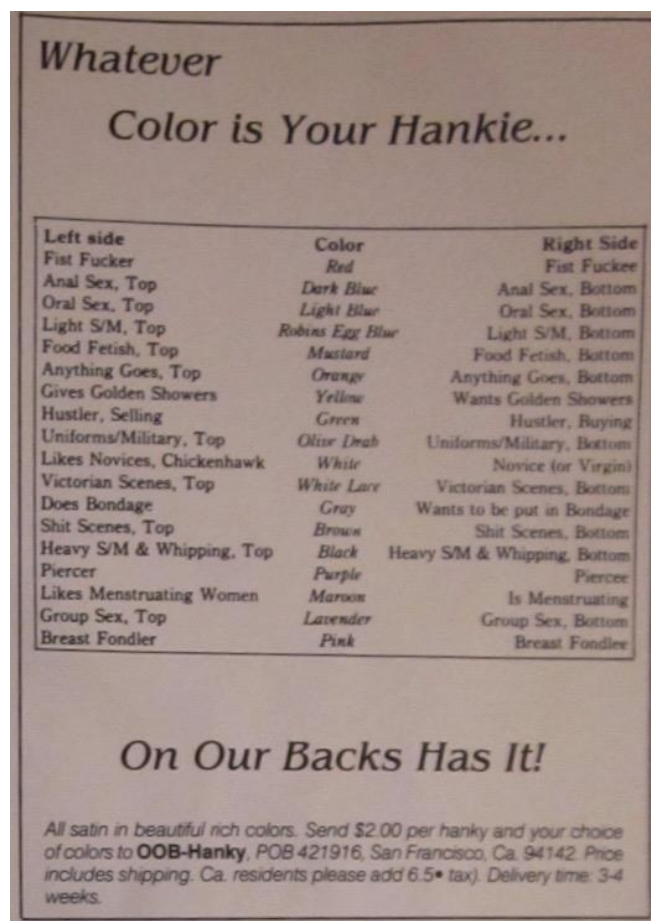


Figure 37 Advertisement from *On Our Backs*, 1984, 1(1) p.47. It references Samois' first publication, asserting its alliance with the by then defunct group, as well as a commitment to diversity in sexual pleasure.

### 5.3 Happy heretics?

I began this thesis with expressing the desire to not overlook the pleasures of SM. Perhaps the extent to which I have been successful in this is questionable.<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, I also wish to suggest there was some pleasure to be gained in SM lesbians' ostracism and being the targeted folk devils of a moral panic.<sup>175</sup> Davis opens her introduction of *Coming to Power*

<sup>174</sup> Doing more intensive oral histories or more detailed studies of SM groups would have allowed me to focus more on the parties, the sex, the friendships and the other affective relationships which do not always jump out of the traditional archive.

<sup>175</sup> What one of Margot Weiss' recent ethnographic studies illustrates is that the status of this move that I describe (i.e. the consolidation of sub-cultural identity via an embrace of oppositionality and minority) is visible as a conflict between in the BDSM community which is perceived as too mainstream, corporate and homonormative by some queer activists in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century US (see Weiss 2008).



with “this is an outrageous book” (1981, p.7) and then describes it as “a statement, a confrontation, a challenge. It calls for a re-evaluation of existing lesbian-feminist ethics, saying, “you must own your ‘illegitimate’ children” (ibid., pp. 12–13). Even in the call for inclusion, she emphasises Samois’ outrageousness. We can begin to see the perverse pleasures of the proliferation of discourse promulgated by its attempted repression, and theorize how the “outlaw” status was integral to the SM dyke identity.

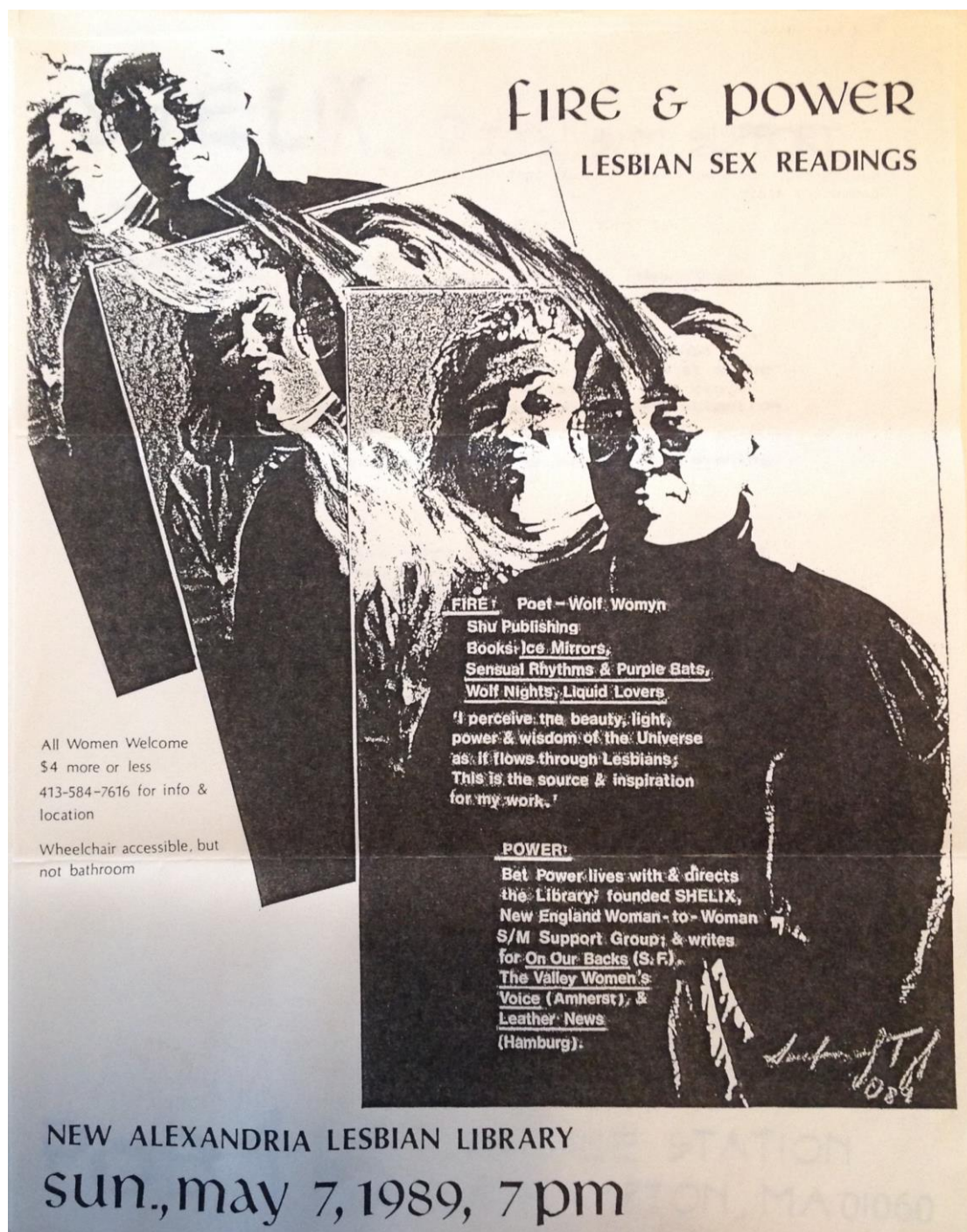


Figure 38 A poster for “Fire and Power”, May 7, 1989. Shelix describes the event in their newsletter in terms of rebellion (Shelix newsletter, May 1989, Allison Papers, Box 23). Note that “all women are welcome”, making clear that trans women were welcome to come, which some SM groups did not allow.

A lesbian sex reading in Northampton is described in similar language, “the sex rebels are at it again with a pro-sex, pro-S/M speakeasy on Sunday, May 7 despite some pro-censorship victories in the Northampton-Amherst area” (Shelix newsletter, May 1989,

Allison Papers, Box 23).

Some SM dykes defending their practices not by using ‘vanilla;’ in a derogatory term per se, but by making implicit and explicit distinctions between boring, moralistic prudish ‘good girls’ and exciting, sexually adventurous, kinky, fun ‘bad girls’.

As a bad girl, I can’t help viewing the debates over pornography, sexuality and freedom feminist anti-porn movement as a bunch of good girls on the rampage: they insist that pornography is nothing but “violence against women”, that “feminist sexuality” is opposed to anything remotely “kinky”, and that any woman who disagrees is brainwashed (Orlando 1983, p.17).

The sides become simplified as trying to live a “Hallmark greeting card” lifestyle (Califia’s accusation) or upholding right wing, anti-feminist values (Russo 1987, p.106; Califia 1981, p.34). These examples support legal scholar Khan’s assertion of SM lesbians as having a “self-construction as outcasts and outlaws against feminist repression and societal rejection” that “generated pleasures through discourses of rebellion and opposition” (2014, p. 21). Furthermore, in being an attacked minority within a minority, they were able to establish groups of like-minded people, and approach those who opposed them together, including sharing jokes, as I will discuss below.

#### **5.4 Feminist killjoys?**

Feminists are often accused of having no sense of humour. They take everything too seriously, are offended by everything and are all old crones.<sup>176</sup> The pro-sex movement was not lacking in humour, but it was not always kind, and Andrea Dworkin is the butt of a disproportionate number of jokes at the anti-sex camp’s expense. In this chapter alone we have already seen Cottrell name Andrea Dworkin’s hair as one of her turnoffs (Figure 34), and Shelix’s invitation to their sex stories reading night asked, “Tired of watching old

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<sup>176</sup> Queer theorist Sara Ahmed has written extensively on the concept of the feminist killjoy and has a blog of the same name (Ahmed n.d.).

Dworkinite reruns? Come and watch Fire and Power instead” (Figure 38). Dworkin becomes (unfairly) an easy laugh and a representative for the entire anti-pornography movement. While making fun of Dworkin’s hair is hardly as violent an act as publically naming individuals as sex perverts (a WAP did in its Barnard leaflet in 1982), there is a connection between the personal and the political: both sides of the SM debate appear to have treated personal preference (or appearance) as fair game in a debate that is fundamentally political in its motivations.

The first issue of *On Our Backs* – see, even the name is poking fun at someone – includes a satirical piece by “Andrix Workin”, representing a new “lesbian/feminist” group called “Concerned Women Against Perverted Individuals” (C.W.A.P.I) entitled “A Cup of Tea is Preferable to Any Sexual Encounter” (Knightly 1984). It is declared a “masturbation-free zone”. They do not tread lightly in suggesting that anti-pornography feminists are most definitely anti-sex (C.W.A.P.I. members allegedly wore tee shirts with slogans like “You don’t need a headache to refuse”). The article mocks a slew of anti-SM discourses, repackaging them so they appear ludicrous. C.W.A.P.I. holds a sign saying, “What right to define your own sexuality? - Back in your closets!”, and critiques a “lesbian/feminist/S//M” group for attempting to rethink long-established views of women’s sexuality, which C.W.A.P.I. members were “not prepared to do”. These feminists’ approach to dealing with their critics was to ridicule them.

## "A Cup of Tea is Preferable to Any Sexual Encounter"

A number of lesbian/feminists in a newly-formed anti-pervert group, C.W.A.P.I. (Concerned Women Against Perverted Individuals) held a picket yesterday outside the offices of a lesbian/feminist S/M support group, to protest at alleged "discrediting of the feminist movement in the eyes of society," and to draw attention to the attempt by S/M lesbians "to assert a different analysis of women's sexuality, thus causing long-established and long-accepted theories to be questioned," which it was stressed, C.W.A.P.I. members were not prepared to do.

C.W.A.P.I. squad members have adopted the familiar slogan, 'HEALTHY MINDS IN HEALTHY BODIES' and advance the idea that a cup of tea is preferable to any sexual encounter. Picket signs reading 'DOWN WITH LEATHER' (whereupon one woman entering the building made suggestions that she would be willing to oblige) could be seen, along with accepted traditional signs, such as 'AN ICE COLD DIP A DAY, KEEPS SEXUAL THOUGHTS AT BAY' and 'KEEP MINORITIES SMALL' were in evidence. However, a rather sinister element could be seen yesterday, in a set of newly made signs, showing a definite direction C.W.A.P.I. were aiming to go in. One such controversial sign read, 'WHAT RIGHT TO DEFINE YOUR OWN SEXUALITY?—BACK IN YOUR CLOSETS'. A sudden bout of confusion ensued when it was discovered that bogus signs had been mixed in with their own signs, which read, 'IF YOU FEEL HORNY—RING FOR LORNI' and 'CUNNILINGUS SPOKEN HERE'. They were quickly broken and ceremoniously burned. Others in support of their sign-carrying sisters wore t-shirts defiantly emblazoned with slogans like 'MASTURBATION FREE ZONE' and 'YOU DON'T NEED A HEADACHE TO REFUSE'.

C.W.A.P.I. co-founder Doormouth Leedheed stated at the picket that the group demanded acknowledgement "that some women had been much more severely corrupted than others by patriarchal modes of thought." In addition their group wanted to bring to the attention of the media the fact that "CWAPI members and the morally upstanding element of the feminist movement feel that in the long run, the repression of perverted women within the movement can only be a healthy move." When our reporter questioned her by suggesting that society at large considered all lesbians to be perverted whatever their persuasion, Leedheed stated, "That point is a grey area, but nevertheless we intend to show society that we are normal in every way—except for being queer."

Andrix Workin, another member of C.W.A.P.I., is rumored to be in the more radical side of the group, SAS (Superior Angry Sisters). This section of the group is supposedly striving for immediate action, and calling for involuntary euthanasia for any totally perverted woman who is unwilling to repent. Workin stated that C.W.A.P.I. wanted to promote "a healthy atmosphere in which only the gentlest lovemaking would be tolerated; and that any woman found to like lesbians in leather, have fantasies and enjoy them, or a longing for rough sex or group sex, would be taken to the nearest women's center, forced to dance to ballet music and be placed in jumble-scale smocks and co-op-made shoes." When it was put to her that this might be going too far, she remarked "I know when to stop."

When questioned that C.W.A.P.I.'s monthly newsletter had actually printed names and addresses of women involved in S/M and that perhaps this was inviting the authorities to keep files on them, or indeed endangering to their lives, Leedheed dismissed it as "hysteria" adding, "It is time for us to stop being modest and proclaim our lifestyles as the true and only valid form of feminist daily experience."

C.W.A.P.I. are very well known for their pamphlet, published last year, 'WHAT COLOR IS YOUR WYNCEYETTE?' which comes complete with a wincy colour code card (ie, buttons front-right side: likes to read in bed, preferably fast-moving and exciting books, like 'The A-Z Discovery of the Micro Chip') and also has a list of shops where winceyettes can be purchased at a reasonable price. They are also well known for their above-ground public demonstrations on how to ward off potential lovers (the famous 'Flash of long johns' scene) and how to identify a 'come on' phrase to repel it swiftly.

Reactions to C.W.A.P.I. in the feminist community have been mixed. Many women are reluctant to question their tactics and assumptions for fear of being labeled perverts themselves. Some have dashed to the nearest nightie counter, others want Lorni's phone number. Who is right? And who will be left, at the end?

Gladys Fewkes Knightly

What do you get if you cross a S/M lesbian with a snail?  
A slimy pervert with no housing problems.

Editor's note: Wincey, a durable wool cloth with a linen warp and a wool weft. (Oxford English Dictionary Supplement. With thanks to the S.F. Public Library.)

# APRIL 1 1984



ON OUR BACKS/23

Figure 39 Gladys Fewkes Knightly's mocking anti-sex article, illustrated with pictures of a corseted woman handcuff (Knightly 1984).

### 5.5 “Whatever gets you wet?” Feminist ethics and sadomasochism

Although there sometimes seems to be an overemphasis on pleasure at any cost, the ethics of feminist pleasure were discussed also by pro-sex feminists.

One *On Our Backs* reader, Colleen Aucrile from Oakland California, was horrified by the story “Daddy” by Ann Wertheim, published in *On Our Backs*’ Fall 1987 issue. It was included in a section called “Fantasies”, designed specifically to allow readers to share their fantasies (Ginsburg 2013a). Wertheim’s story is an SM tale of a girl and her dyke “Daddy”.

I Love my Daddy.

Daddy always disciplines me after school to help get me in the proper frame of mind. Sometimes when I get home Daddy is sitting in her favorite chair stroking her special dildo. I crawl over to her and she makes me suck her off. My Daddy loves to make me give her a blowjob. The thought of spanking me always gives Daddy a hard on. (Wertheim, 1987, p. 9).

Aucrile’s reaction, published in the next issue:

I bought your magazine with great gusto; however, after reading the story *Daddy*, I was revolted, disgusted and not amused. Please tell me, for whom was this written? Also, is *On Our Backs* really run by women?

Please try to remember that 1 in 4 of your audience, that is the women of your audience, have been raped. I wonder if this author has been raped and/or sexually humiliated. It isn't fun (*On Our Backs* Winter 1988 p.5).

Even those who, in principle, believed in the concept of a lesbian sex magazine (she bought it “with great gusto”) were sometimes shocked and disgusted by the content. Indeed, it is much harder to ridicule these kinds of critiques from allies or potential allies.

Aucrile cannot believe, firstly, any lesbian would want to read a Daddy/girl story. Secondly, that any woman could condone such a story and choose to publish it (“is *On Our Backs* really run by women?”) And thirdly, that if the author *was* a survivor of sexual violence, she cannot believe how she could get pleasure from such as story, and if she *was not*, then how could she be so unaware of others’ feelings as to write something that could be

triggering to others.<sup>177</sup>

In the spirit of discussion, *On Our Backs* printed the author's response alongside.

Daddy is a fantasy, not reality. When I act out this fantasy it is with a consenting adult lesbian. There is a world of difference between sexual humiliation in reality and in fantasy. My Story has nothing to do with rape.

I wrote my story for all the women who have this fantasy. I believe that we cannot judge our fantasies—whateverworks [sic] —whatever gets you wet—as long as acting it out involves consenting adults. It wasn't so long ago that lesbian fantasies were judged sick and Disgusting [sic] (*On Our Backs*, Winter 1988, p.5).

Wertheim does *not* eroticise an abusive, incestuous relationship, she explains. Rather, she eroticises a consensual lesbian genderfuck dynamic in which her lover is a daddy-like figure, in a situation that pleases them both.

However, when she states “whatever gets you wet”, I am not sure that this directly accounts for a feminist ethics of care or consent, which I began to explore in chapter 4. One library student suggests that she “seems to connect not only the materiality of arousal (‘whatever gets you wet’), but also its visibility and externality (not ‘whatever gives you adorable butterflies in your tummy’) to the immunity from judgment she desires” (Sarah Beth 2012). Being aroused does not justify everything. Practicing consent and getting wet do not necessarily have to align. But for S/M practiced in a feminist lesbian contexts, at least, they do. The question raised here further complicates the question of consent, by pointing to an implicit distinction between the body's consent (arousal) and the mind's.

Amber Hollibaugh has seen the complexities of negotiating pleasure and politics, and embraced them. Reflecting on the 1982 Barnard conference, she says,

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<sup>177</sup> One British lesbian remembers that the SM debates actually brought up the issue of lesbian domestic violence. She remembers, SM “became an issue in the early 1980s in London. I was in Lesbians Against Sadomasochism from 1984... I see SM as a variety of lesbian violence, the SM issue really brought up the issue of lesbian domestic violence for me.” – Fiona, 57, middle class, quoted in Todd (2013, p. 161).

I didn't want to take controversy out of sex. I didn't want to pretend that I didn't think that there were very difficult issues when your erotic desires came from the culture that hated women! But it didn't mean I didn't want desire and it didn't mean I was giving up my body to be a good feminist (Haimowitz 2005).

The anti-porn feminists in effect ask “sexual outlaw” feminists to give up their bodies and their desires. We are left with the question what is more important, politics, or consensual sexual pleasure? It leads back to the question, “whatever gets you wet?” what the debates over SM show us is that perfect alignment between sexual behaviour and sexual politics is neither possible nor desirable, or that the personal is not, in fact, wholly political. “Consent” seems to name the public/political (and politicizable) dimension of private/personal sexuality. Perhaps it is the debate over what constitutes meaningful consent that we should bring forward into our own moment from the SM debates – *not* the wrangling over the political implications of particular sex acts.

### **5.6 The first SM-Leather Contingent at the 1987 March on Washington**

The Second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was a large political rally that took place in Washington, D.C. on October 11, 1987. A VHS clip from the Leather Museum and Archives shows a large group and diverse collection of marchers behind a large, black banner with “SM-LEATHER CONTINGENT” and chains emblazoned on it, with different SM groups holding their own, smaller banners (Leather Museum and Archives 2014). A woman holding another woman on a chain poses defiantly for a picture; hysterical laughing is coming from somewhere. This was first a – both joyous and defiant – display of national visibility, uniting geographically diverse SM groups around the US with each other and other LGBT communities.<sup>178</sup> And *off our backs* did not mention them in any of their march coverage, which hints not at the end of the sex wars but of the accompanying sex

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<sup>178</sup> The National Leather Association had hosted the annual Living in Leather conference since 1985, but this was a leather community event rather than a large, LGBT, political one. They marched again as an SM-Leather contingent in the next March on Washington in 1993.



panic’s cooling down.<sup>179</sup>

101

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101-106 hot postcards

102

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105

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Name

Qty  
in doz.

Price  
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total


106

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with order. Make check/  
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• One sample set provided  
at no charge with orders  
over \$45.00.

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(N.Y. residents only)

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5-12 doz. same card. .... 47¢ per card

Over 12 doz. same card. ... 45¢ per card

Shipping Charges

Orders under \$50. .... \$2.00

Over \$50-\$100. .... \$3.00

Over \$100. .... \$4.00

103

104

ON OUR BACKS

Figure 40 Leatherdykes are eroticised in *On Our Backs* with postcards you can proudly display in your home (or wherever) and share.

<sup>179</sup> Neither in the mainstream media (Williams 1987).

145

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the importance of an alternative press that allowed lesbians to relish being on their backs. Dorothy Allison cannot stress enough the importance of creating spaces that validate minority desires; spaces that exist so the mainstream does not define your sense of self and relation to the world.

If you have not created your own sense of legitimacy and you're out of your own community, you are vulnerable to their redefinition. That's hegemony. You've got to fight it. That's what we were doing in the Lesbian Sex Mafia that I still think is important and powerful and saved people's lives (Allison 2007, p.58).

Pro-SM writing, and in particular the letters to the editor pages, can, I think, be considered an anti-hegemonic space of alternative community-creation that counters the hysterical sex panic discourse present in other media. Although not everyone was satisfied 100% of the time, and even within this alternative feminist realm disagreements were rife, feminists had a safer space to ask questions, express their desires, and ogle shirtless butches and purchase a leatherdyke calendar (see Figure 40). This was a type of victory, but the sex wars did rage on, feminist bookstores still refused to stock these publications, tearing them up and burning them (as I describe in chapter 4). Nevertheless, women all over the country were still able to get their hands on copies, and think along with the publishers, writers and photographers how to rethink a lesbian feminist politics of sexual pleasure that had room for both leatherdykes and woman-identified-women.

## Final Thoughts and Conclusions

### Coming to terms with power?



**Figure 41** Review of *Coming to Power*, in *The Body Politic*, p.32, May 1982. In a rare review (since many publications simply would not promote or discuss Samois – Dorothy Allison’s archives (Box 21) are full of photocopied letters (sent to her by friends in Samois?) from feminist publications explaining they just cannot include an ad for *Coming to Power*). The reviewer Sue Golding calls *Coming to Power* “the best thing that’s been published on feminist theory/practice in a long, long time” (p.32).

“Why write about sex?” is the question that Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson ask at the beginning of their 1983 anthology *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, a question that remains ever so relevant today as I write about lesbians who enjoy sadomasochistic sex. They do not miss a beat before adding Foucault’s warning, “in speaking we unwittingly define and proscribe who may desire whom, when, and how. To advance the course of sexual freedom, then paradoxically tighten the grip of the system” (Snitow et al. 1983, p.9). Yet, they remind us, women and sexual minorities have historically struggled to speak as loudly as the voices that try and describe and categorise them. “As a result, while

feminism has cast its own new, if variable, illumination on the subject of sex, the apprehension of sex as subject is still impeded by the density of former traditions,” they write. “It is too soon, then, for silence” (Snitow et al. 1983, p.10).

All “sides” of the US 1970s and 1980s feminist debate about lesbian sadomasochism, as I have revealed throughout my thesis, have not been silent, even if much of the scholarship addressing this period of feminist history has, as I outline in chapter 1. In speaking out, feminists labelled (by themselves at the time) either “pro-sex” or “anti-censorship” exchanged volleys with those who were called “anti-pornography” or simply “lesbian feminist”, attempting to draw lines in the sand about politically correct and incorrect lesbian politics, “good” lesbian sex and the meaning of consent and “old-fashioned” practices. In writing this thesis, I have attempted to do justice to the complex legacy of lesbian SM by replaying aspects of it here and presenting it again for re-inspection.

What this re-inspection reveals is that various sophisticated discursive techniques and violent or violating actions (from humour to picketing) have been used by feminists against each other in the pursuit of a sexuality that aligns with a politically correct feminist politics. This is an iteration of a longer conflict between feminism and lesbianism, as I explore in chapter 2. “The personal is political” is not simply an old feminist adage, but a fundamental call to examine the public/private split in feminist and lesbian subjectivities and identity formation. But passion does not always follow the rules, as my analysis of pro-lesbian sex discourses in chapter 5 reveals.

I have explored how lesbian SM has more often than not taken centre stage since the late 1970s when discussions about the politics of sexuality began stirring in feminist (and lesbian feminist) magazines. Following Foucault, I have paid especial attention to who does the speaking about sex and from where, as well as the discourse’s means of distribution (Foucault 1980b, p.11). Through his theoretical lens, we can see this moment in the late

1970s as “the bringing into discourse of sexuality” (ibid.), in which sadomasochism bursts into a feminist movement that had, until that point, de-emphasised the importance of lesbian lusts and stressed instead the significance of equality on the streets *and* in the sheets. This is a crucial moment in the history of lesbian sexuality, an instance where we see a parallel to Foucault’s famous theorisation that “the sodomite was a temporary aberration; the homosexual is now a species” (ibid., p.43). We see the creation of the lesbian sadomasochist as a “species”, not based on biological reality but constructed through discursive practice, with its origins both in sexological conceptions of sexual deviance as well as lesbian feminist ones, and all the pleasure, control and power plays that such a move entails.

This thesis suggests that the emergence of discourse around lesbian sadomasochism during the 1970s and 1980s had a dual effect on SM subjectivity. Firstly, it created an identity that could be isolated and therefore attacked. Lesbian sadomasochists could become, in the language of sex panics, “folk devils” (see below). Furthermore, in being attacked as a specific type of person, i.e. *as lesbian sadomasochists*, a new, international, imagined community of women who shared the desire for sadomasochism was forming, a dialectical process of crystallization through exclusion/minoritization”. In addition, the category of “feminist” was challenged from all directions. In 1989, Bet Power could claim, “S/M-Leatherwomen are the sexual minority being attacked by fundamentalist, anti-porn ‘feminists’” (Shelix newsletter, April 1989, Allison Papers, Box 23).

While some decried lesbian sadomasochism as the epitome of internalised, male oppression and violence, and a threat to the unity of lesbian identity community, others vaunted SM as a flexible and cathartic form of sexual practice where power is self-consciously played with by consenting feminist lesbians. These contradicting discourses form the basis of my analysis in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 3 in particular, I have explored the forms in which this debate escalated to a full blown “sex panic”, in which, as Gilbert Herdt

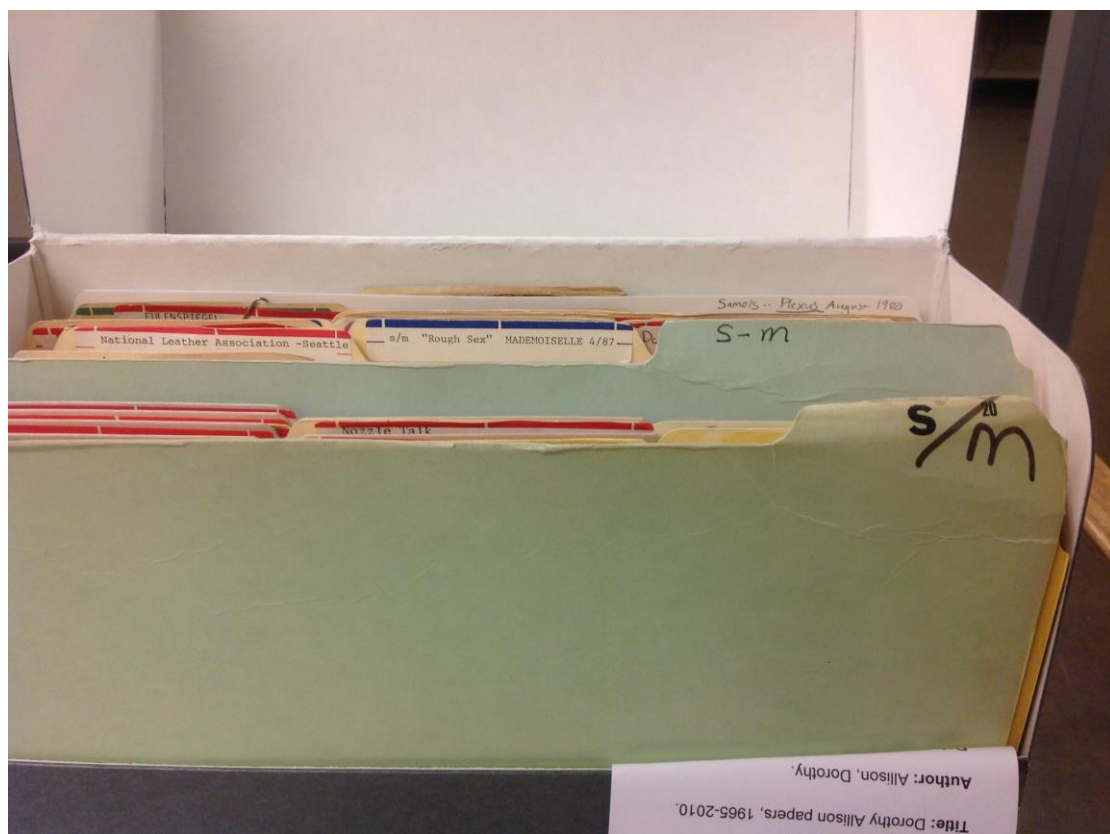
has theorised as typical of sex panics, resulted in a level of both community and personal reactions “out of proportion with the threat cause by the so-called ‘folk devils’ (e.g., masturbating children, unwed mothers) and evil-doer (e.g., homosexuals) groups” (2009, pp.1–2). Certainly the newly formed “lesbian sadomasochist” vacillated between “folk devil” and “evil-doer”, and the sex panic she caused escalated, manifesting in various forms ranging from picketing outside conferences like Barnard in 1982, launching slanderous personal attacks and physical attacks on politically incorrect dykes, organising panels, writing articles and letters to the editor, and refusing to publish or stock work about SM. It was met in turn with the creation of lesbian SM support groups and then, mostly from 1984 onwards, with the founding of lesbian sex magazines and counter hegemonic, imagined communities that celebrated the diversity and perversity of lesbian sexuality, and made fun endlessly of those who disagreed.

The time period this thesis covers ends in the late 1980s, by which point *On Our Backs* was continuing to publish lesbian smut, but *Bad Attitude* had experienced various changes of hands and finally floundered (Ginsburg 2013a). The lesbian SM debates had also floundered, and today seem like a distant part of the feminist past.<sup>180</sup> However, the highly emotive, often violent and personal nature of discussions about trans inclusion and sex work (which had their roots in the period I describe, and are also opposed by many of the anti-SM feminists) that play out today seem to hold a comparable place in contemporary feminist movements. Nevertheless, the impact of the SM debates on the feminist movement, the

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<sup>180</sup> I really hoped to complete this thesis without making reference to the popular, erotic *Fifty Shades* trilogy by E. L. James, but I have to admit that it is enlightening to make a comparison of reactions to SM between the 1980s and today, even though James’ books are about a heterosexual couple (male dominant and female submissive). I have not done an in depth analysis of feminist reactions to the book, but many (both in mainstream publications like *The Guardian*, and feminist websites like *Feministing*) take the stance that *Fifty Shades* is terrible, but not because it represents a SM relationship, but because it *misrepresents* the practices of consent integral to real life BDSM people and just portrays an abusive relationship (Smith 2015; Child 2015; Barnes 2015). Another *Guardian* headline reads, “If the Personal is Political, is it Ever OK to Want a Spanking?” The answer within is: “*Fifty Shades of Grey* might not prioritize consent or BDSM protocol – but don’t worry too much about what turns your on” (Alptraum 2015). Over ten years of feminist battles during the 1970s, 80s and early 90s condensed casually into a headline fin 2015...

lesbian movement, even the field of sexuality studies, has been immense but remains unrepresented in current scholarship. This thesis is intended to be a step towards comprehending the form and nature of this impact. It works to break down the monolithic view of the “two sides” of the debates, and explore the pleasures and dangers they entailed. One simply cannot fathom the ways in which questions about sexuality and feminism have interacted in the United States since the sex wars without returning to the 1980s and the SM debates.



**Figure 42 Dorothy Allison's SM file at the Rubenstein, Duke University, March 23 2015, (Box 20). Allison's papers were kept organised under these headings by Allison herself, in a garage, before being donated to Duke according to a librarian at the Rubenstein (Kelly Wooten, Pers. Comm., March 23, 2015). Duke holds 92.5 Linear Feet, 69,375 items, which amounts to 31 boxes of her records. I was only able to look at five.**

Because of the immensity of the topic, the wealth of archival material just waiting to be dusted off and the relative lack of dedicated studies that exist so far, there is still much to be explored. We still know far more about Gayle Rubin “PhD” than Gayle Rubin “DJ”. To

expand on what I have gestured towards at the beginning of this thesis in the limitations section, and in footnotes throughout, directions for further study could include the international element of lesbian SM connections, the experiences of people of colour, disabled people, heterosexuals and trans folks who were also SM feminists. Issues of how class and race has played out within SM communities would also be an important, intersectional approach to take. Furthermore, the ways in which the sex wars and SM impacted rural lesbians' lives and those living outside major US cities on the East and West coasts, I think, would be an important contribution to the ways in which isolation from feminist community impacts on identity formation and political actions. How space – battles over access to women's centres and campers at Mich fest, or the use of gay male leather clubs and private houses for play parties, for example – has functioned for SM dykes too, could be a worthwhile sexual geography project. In addition, the ways in which debates about sadomasochism intersect with those about butch-femme roles, enjoying or making pornography, sex work and other sexual deviations could be expanded upon. Detailed histories of the various support groups and organisations that were at the epicentre of lesbian SM life in the US, their publications and their individual members have yet to be written (Figure 43). While my thesis focuses mostly on public debates and some forms of lesbian cultural production, an in depth study of the inner workings of these groups would enhance our understanding of the period greatly. I conducted only four, short interviews as part of this study; oral histories would be a rich addition to a future project, especially in terms of teasing out SM dykes' own ways of self-identifying in terms of gender and sexuality amongst the



fracas,<sup>181</sup> although I would approach interviews with caution because of the still sometimes explosive nature of the topic.<sup>182</sup>



**Figure 43** The stories of individuals, like “Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain”, pictured here, and stories of the SM dyke scene in London are yet to be told (Del LaGrace Volcano, 1988 (?), Lesbian Herstory Archives Photo files, Del LaGrace Volcano folders). The location is unknown, but it could be somewhere like London’s lesbian SM club, Chain Reactions.

“Bully for you for going public with what those bitches did to Amber!!” Pat Califia wrote to Dorothy Allison in 1981 after women from Women Against Pornography (WAP) attempted to remove her from a panel (Figure 44). It is hardly surprising that for both sides,

<sup>181</sup> Here I am particularly interested in the idea of SM as “genderfuck” (playing with gender), and placing erotic desires for dominance and submission (etc.) over sexual desires for a specific gender. Insights from queer theory would be particularly instrumental in this kind of analysis (see Hale 2003, for example).

<sup>182</sup> Bronstein chose not to do oral histories at all: “I found that the bitter conflicts of the 1980s had made women on both sides of the debate wary of any treatment of the movement, fearing the possibility of further vilification of individuals and/or ideological positions. In one instance, a leading anti-pornography movement activist consented to be interviewed only if I would sign a statement assuring her that this book would not include any discussion of the Barnard conference and the conflict surrounding events that took place there” (2011a, p.12).

even in remembering skirmishes from the sex wars, the emotion remains. Take anti-pornography feminist Susan Brownmiller's story for an example: "'Then,' Dorchen [Leidholdt, a member of WAP] recalls with a shudder, 'came the Barnard conference'" (as cited in Brownmiller, 1999, p. 314). Reading reflections on the period from "survivors" of the pro-sex side of the sex wars such as Lisa Duggan's "Love and Anger: Scenes from a Passionate Career", Gayle Rubin's "Blood Under the Bridge: Reflections on 'Thinking Sex'", not to mention Dorothy Allison's personal papers and Amber Hollibaugh's memoir/essay collection *My Dangerous Desires*, I really am struck by just how personally damaging these debates were, how distressing, and ultimately, how incredibly unnecessary (Duggan 2011; Rubin 2011a; Allison 1994; Hollibaugh 2000). As Gilbert Herdt points out, "Moral panics in their awful sweep do material damage, undermine careers, incite riots, and kill people" (2009, p.17). The sex wars were not a purely intellectual battle, and its techniques had more in common with right wing politics than feminist ones.

December 4, 1981

3355 - 21 Street  
San Francisco, CA 94110

Dear Dorothy:

I am sitting here <sup>at work</sup> reading a copy of "Erotic Blasphemy," and I think I will just write my comments to you as I scan down the page.

Page 1

"being the sexual outlaw that I am, not only lesbian-feminist but macho-femme flirt" -- Dorothy, is this really an honest description of ~~me~~ why you are a sexual outlaw?

\* I like including men who "speak directly to my own fascination with risk & power & difference"

"the connection to be made between why people behave the way they do and what is to be done about it"--I don't think this is the most interesting question ~~about it~~ in the sexual debate. I in fact have strong ~~objections~~ objections to asking why people behave the way they do, since that question usually assumes there's something wrong with it. And I'm not sure we ~~need~~ need to "do" anything about it (i.e., censorship, prison sentences, therapy, hand-wringing) other than leave ourselves alone.

Page 2

Bully for you to go public with what those bitches did to Amber!! Even The Nation has shown their complete lack of gonads by backing down and saying WAP never demanded that she be pulled from the panel. And of course WAP is threatening to sue anyone who claims that they did this. It was a shameful piece of censorship (albeit merely an attempt).

And I do like your beginning of a critique of the anti-porn movement, but I think you should have gone into more detail about ~~what~~ what was "not being said but implied." The lack of this kind of detail leaves the critique weak.

Page 3

"I have always believed that telling the truth about our lives . . ." Well, this sounds good on paper, but one of the problems with the whole article is that you keep calling for this sort of honest revelation, but you never make any. Once again, it weakens the article and lowers it to the level of rhetoric.

Good connection between issues of race, class and issues of sexuality. This needs to be made more often. Wonderful.

Good on you also for picking up on Leah Fritz's pseudoshrink (and frankly to me fascistic-sounding) attack on "collaborators." Susan Griffin has the same line--"We're all sick, but s/M is a more extreme form of the disease"--

**Figure 44** Pat Califia congratulated Dorothy Allison on going "public with what those bitches" – the women in WAP – "did to Amber [Hollibaugh]!!" in a 1981 letter from Califia to Allison, with comments on a draft of Allison's "Erotic Blasphemy", published as "Lesbian Politics in the '80s: Erotic Blasphemy", in *New York Native*, December 7-20, 1981 (Allison Papers, Box 5; Author, Personal Photograph, 23 March, 2015).

We see how important conversations, which may have increased different groups' understanding of one another, were often silenced by patronising attitudes and censorship, or

simply lost in the vitriol. As member of the grassroots San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project Rubin remembers, “I was sufficiently radioactive that for many years after [Barnard] I was not asked to share my research at any of our public presentations” (Rubin 2011a, p.20).<sup>183</sup> In fact, I find it highly distressing that distributing leaflets naming, shaming and vilifying women for their (assumed) sexual practices, burning books or ransacking bookstores could be genuinely considered “feminist” and be done in order to protect other women from psychic and physical violence. Faderman calls it an “era of lesbian-feminist tyranny” (Faderman 1992, p.584).

I have done this study keeping in mind Heather Love’s warning to queer people dealing with the queer past that “We cannot help wanting to save the figures from the past but this mission is doomed to fail... the queer past is even more remote, more deeply marked by power’s claw...” (2007, p.51). Yet, as I have delved deeper into their world and become myself more personally entangled, I also empathise with so-called lesbian tyrants’ passion for defending their politics, their commitment to fighting patriarchy and attempts to change the world, even if my beliefs on what constitutes the “enemy” do not always align with theirs.

Where to from here, then? Have we really “come to terms with power” by now? Have lesbian feminists “learned to stop worrying and start loving their dildoes” as Sophie Schmuckler did in 1981, or at least stopped worrying if other women loved theirs or not? And if so, how does historicizing this shift contribute to a politics of progression? Does sexual politics always call for a temporalized or historicized account of sexual behaviour? As my analysis in chapter 4 shows, little can be achieved when arguments are not engaged with in

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<sup>183</sup> Even at events where Rubin was not specifically speaking about SM topics, it was enough that she was a known SM dyke to have actions such as boycotts organised against her. Here is an example of SM even silencing conversations that do not involve it, so strong was the taint of SM on those who practiced it. Some members of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, (founded around 1978 – 79) attempted to have her expelled, both because she was a member of the “then nascent” lesbian SM community, and also because her research was on gay male leather and SM. The outcome was that Rubin remained, but her strongest opponents left the group (Rubin 2011a, p.20).

depth, and instead generalised to the point of emotive meaning only. Queer theorist Juana María Rodríguez has recently asks some of these important questions from a different angle, calling for specific and grounded research, something that as I have demonstrated, is largely absent in moral panic-fuelled or defensive considerations of SM: “how do we begin to make sense of our politically incorrect erotic desires? More to the point, what kind of sense is even desirable or possible?” (2011, p.342). She begins to think through what a queer of colour critique, for example – that which Moraga identifies as absent in the 1980’s white women’s sex wars – might be able to add to such discussions. She writes:

In relation to both sex and sociality, we must learn to read submission and service differently. In Spanish to say someone is ‘servicial’ (‘servile’ or ‘of service’) is not to dismiss him or her as being weak, or devoid of desires or agency; instead, it most often is a compliment that recognizes that person’s willingness to acknowledge and respond to the needs and desires of another [...] What might it mean to read sex and sociality through this culturally inflected reading, through a Latina femme understanding of servitude and submission? (Rodriguez 2011, 338).

What we might begin to see from these lesbian SM debates are the possibilities for reconfiguring the limits of feminist thought, with space for all the passion, the politics and the politically correct *and* incorrect sex that lesbians may desire. Ultimately, perhaps, we ought to throw the very notion of “correctness” when it comes to consensual sex out of the window, or at least work to redefine it. For Dorothy Allison,

this is what perverse really means – to be disobedient to the rule of fear and hatred and shame, to seek one’s own definitions and ideals regardless of what others insist are the limits to what you may want or have (Hollibaugh 2000, p.xi).

My study of lesbian SM contributes to unravelling the complexities of what happens when passionate, political and politically incorrect feminists push these limits.

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