

Trouble & Strife

The radical feminist magazine

Trouble & Strife

Lesbian sex, power and perverse politics

Dworkin on Dworkin

Making history: Brixton Black Women's Group

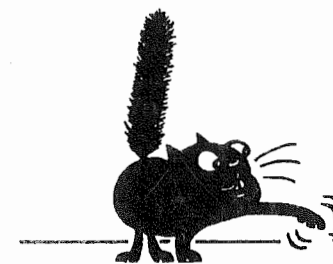
Women, fundamentalism and freedom

The sexual revolution: was it good for you?

Pornography: abuse in the making

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Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble & Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Agnes Quashie and Sara Scott; with help from Judy Stevens, Catherine Tidnam, and Alison Dickens, Caroline Forbes, Emma Kelly and Hilary Allen. With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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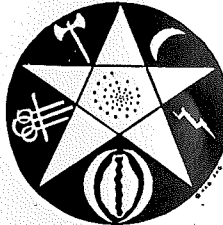
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DWORKIN on DWORKIN

Andrea Dworkin talks about her work, her life and the future of feminism with Elizabeth Braeman and Carol Cox in this, the full version of an interview first published in the tenth birthday issue of 'off our backs'.

The interview with Andrea Dworkin which appeared in the January issue of *Off Our Backs* was one which had been cut to two thirds of its original length due to *oob* requirements. The number of pages allotted to the Dworkin interview was unfair in light of the issue as a whole which also included an interview with Barbara Wilson. Andrea Dworkin is widely believed to be the murder victim in Wilson's recent book *The Dog Collar Murders*.

Oob responded to our letter of protest by saying that three pages for the interview was sufficient and that they saw no problem with including the two interviews in the same issue. We were told by the collective that if we wanted to have input into the decisions of the paper we would have to join the collective. Once again, women who are part of an established institution make the rules. We had hoped for better from *oob*. We continue to protest the treatment given to Andrea by *oob* (see our letter in the May issue) and urge readers to hold them accountable.

In Sisterhood,
Elizabeth Braeman and
Carol Cox

Elizabeth Braeman: The theme of "Letters from a War Zone Writings 1976-1989" is that women do not have freedom of speech. What exactly do you mean by that?

Andrea Dworkin: Well I think that our restraint from being able to engage in speech operates on many levels. There's the superficial level of what's required to gain access to mainstream media the answer being complete and total conformity, not just stylistically but in terms of content. You have to say what fits in their picture what it is they want to hear. If you don't do that you will not be able to publish, you'll have a terrible time. That's across the board, for any political person. But it works in a much more ruthless way for feminists because men take feminist analysis as a sexual challenge and experience it that way and therefore have a very visceral and vengeful reaction to pieces of 'speech' that they don't like. They experience, I think, a lot of radical feminist writing actually as if it were a sexual assault on them and since most of them don't know what a sexual assault is they have the privilege of overreacting in that way.

Then on a deeper level, one of the things I've learned in the last fifteen years is how much women are silenced through sexual abuse. The simple experience of being abused whether as a child or as an adult has an

incredible impact on everything about the way you see the world around you, so that either you don't feel you can speak because you're frightened of what the retaliation will be, or you don't trust your experience of reality enough to speak, that happens to a lot of incest victims. Or you are actually physically kept from being able to speak - battered women do not have freedom of speech. So it operates on that level.

I was quoting in the book Hannah Arendt who was a brilliant woman but certainly no feminist and her observation that without freedom of movement you can't have freedom of anything and in fact most of us still live as quasi-prisoners in order to maintain some kind of safety. If you think about all the places we don't go, all the boundaries we have to accept in order to stay alive, then the extra boundaries that we put in there as a kind of buffer zone for ourselves so that we all feel safe whether we're safe or not, I mean our freedom of movement is exceptionally restricted. And then also I was referring to the restriction, the physical restriction of women's bodies in women's clothes, in things like high heeled shoes, in girdles, in things that bind the body where the object is to turn the woman into some kind of ornament and in turning her into an ornament

she then is deprived, literally, of the physical ability to move or it's severely impaired. So I think it operates on all those different levels and I think that any woman who thinks that she has freedom of speech or freedom of movement is absolutely denying reality.

EB: The argument used in defence of pornography is that it is freedom of speech and that women have freedom of speech and that we can combat pornography in the "marketplace of ideas" and what you have said certainly has an impact on that idea that we can freely compete in the marketplace of ideas and that our words have equal impact as the words of pornographers do?

AD: I think that that part of the argument is a specific argument and it's very important to address it specifically. The first amendment only protects speech that has already been expressed and it only protects it from punishment by the state. It doesn't stop a man from punching you out for what you said. Supposedly there are other laws that do but in fact they don't. It doesn't stop anybody from using economic recriminations against you for what you say. It doesn't stop anybody from deciding that you're an uppity bitch because of what you say and they're going to hurt you because you said something that they didn't like. If you think about it, in interpersonal relationships that women have with men, I mean how often women are insulted verbally or are physically hurt because of what we say. We say something that is perceived as being not sufficiently compliant and then you take that and you put it out in the world in the sphere of social reality. There is no doubt that the first amendment does not save women from all the kinds of punishment that women are consistently subjected to.

Then the second part of that is that the first amendment protects people who have access to the media and in our country that means mostly people with money. It doesn't protect anybody who doesn't have access and was never intended to. It was written by white men who owned white women and black slaves. A lot of them owned black slaves, none of whom ever got any first amendment protection of any kind. In fact, if there's any kind of correlation between the first amendment and the actual status quo, the keeping of wealth by those who have privilege, specifically has to do with literacy. White men, who

owned property, who owned women as chattel, who owned black slaves, also happened to be the people who could read and write and there were actually laws in the slave states saying you could not teach a slave how to read, it was against the law. The first amendment didn't do anything about it. Now lawyers have all kinds of reasons why that's true. It doesn't matter, the point is that the first amendment is now being used in an almost metaphoric way for freedom of speech as if the first amendment protects everybody's right to speech and it doesn't. It's not a grant to individuals of a right to speak, if it were you would be able to go to the government and you would be able to say "I need four minutes on NBC I have something I want to say" and you can't do that (laughter) I have found the arguments around the first amendment incredibly naive, absolutely unwilling to deal with the reality of male power and of money power, the meaning of wealth in this society and I've been deeply disappointed not to see feminists making an analysis that addresses the marginality of women's speech and the speech in particular of people of colour, who also don't have that kind of access. Probably the worst liberal cop-out of the women's movement has been to accept this freedom of speech bullshit from white boys, who in fact do have freedom of speech, because they do have money and they do have access.

... the worst liberal cop-out of the women's movement has been to accept this freedom of speech bullshit from white boys ...

Carol Cox: You say in "Pornography and Grief" written in 1978, "Perhaps I have found the real source of my grief: we have not yet become a revolutionary movement." Are we closer or further away from forming a revolutionary movement?

AD: The honest answer is I don't know. The movement has changed tremendously. On one hand, there has been an incredible global spread of feminism so that international feminism is tremendously vibrant and that is very hopeful for the future of women on the planet. But in this country the epidemic of violence against women has intensified so greatly. The situation of women in my view is so much worse and so much of what was the women's movement twelve years ago has, in a sense, cut and run. They have taken what the women's movement has been able to give them, which is a kind of minimal economic advancement if you are middle-class and have certain skills, especially if you are an academic or a lawyer. A lot of the movement that really are liberal democrats. Feminism has become more and more a lifestyle word.

... the retaliation against feminists has been very serious and very systematic. Now women are making decisions for individual survival over political solidarity and political honour.

On the other hand, I think there has been a deepening understanding of radical feminist ideas and more grass-roots, radical activity now probably than there has ever been, even though it is not reflected in the media. There is also what I consider to be a relatively new development in that there are also men out there who have been at least partially formed by feminist ideas and who are, in some cases, activists against male violence against women.

At the same time, I see the solid middle, which every movement has to have, having kind of fallen apart. I am a radical but I'm a radical who believes that you have to have the whole spectrum of people. You need your mainstream feminists, you need your reformists, you need the people who do all these different kinds of work and I don't

know what it means if you've got very brilliant, very resourceful feminists all over the country who are doing direct action, who are doing grass-roots organising, but who are very poor and don't have access to mass media in a country where mass media makes up reality for so many people.

It is my impression that at the beginning of the women's movement and I wasn't here for it, I was living in Europe at the time, people were very excited and thrilled and celebrational and all those words that I think are fairly good words: arrogant and pushy and brazen. However, they apparently didn't anticipate that people who had power were not going to be thrilled to give it up and might actually start fighting back. When they started fighting back some blood was going to flow because they have the means to hurt you very badly. We have lost that middle ground because the retaliation against feminists has been very serious and very systematic. Now women are making decisions for individual survival over political solidarity and political, what I would call, honour.

CC: When you say that you think a lot more radical, grass-roots actions are going on, is that something you've seen by being around?

AD: You can't actually hear about most of it. It is not reported, even in the feminist press, which is much more shallow than it used to be and much less in touch with the women who are actually doing things. I know a lot of the women because I travel through the country all of the time and I see it. I see it happening. If I weren't there and I didn't see it, I wouldn't know it was happening.

Liberal feminism is the feminism that the media plays back to us. But through travelling I can tell you that there are women everywhere, in every part of the country, every small town, every rural by-way, who are doing something for women. Some of it is direct action, some of it is what is called social services, to do with battery and to do with rape. I think that there is a deeper understanding of the role of male violence in keeping women down now than there ever has been. How is it going to express itself in a way that's going to make the whole society have to deal with it on its own terms is another question. The women's movement in that sense has deepened, has reached more people, but one of the problems that we have is that some of us, in different

ways and at different times, really are ghetto feminists. You know, we know ourselves and our five friends and that is how we see feminism.

But, in fact, any political movement that is really going to be successful is going to involve not just people that you don't know, but people that are very different from you. One of the interesting things about feminism now is that it is no longer the urban, middle-class movement that it started out being. You find feminists in Appalachia, you find feminists in Rock Springs, Wyoming who are the strongest damn feminists you'll ever see in your lives who are standing up to those men out there and that's sort of thrilling.

EB: Along those lines, what do you see as the changing role of lesbians in grass roots radical feminism?

AD: What I see disturbs me very much. I see women younger than myself, I'm 43, and I see women who are 10 years younger than myself feeling, and maybe they're right because they're smart women, that they have to be closeted. Women who 10 years ago would not have stood for being closeted now are exceptionally determined to have a very schizoid existence, a professional world in which they function one way and a private world in which they function another way. That upsets and depresses me beyond anything I can say to you. I think they have looked at the environment they live in and probably have judged it correctly but I hate it that they're doing that and a lot of lesbians are doing it.

In terms of the whole country, I see women in these grass roots groups taking stands for lesbians even if the lesbians are closeted. For instance, to go back to Rock Springs, Wyoming for a minute, they include something about lesbians in everything they do and I think that a lot of women in the country consider it a moral imperative. Lesbians are still responsible for a lot of the leadership in whatever is happening all over the country but there's much more hiding and secrecy and duplicity again and I find it very frightening.

GB: Do you think that has to do with the rise of the right wing?

AD: I haven't heard anybody have a different motive for anything that was done since

Reagan was elected. That is too simple. I will tell you frankly I think it is because of the pressure of the people around them, the people around them usually are liberal men. That's the point of contact, that's where the pressure hits home. You can blame it on a conservative environment but the fact of the matter is that those men, the ones who are close to you, the ones who are near you, the ones you work with, want to believe that you're there and they can fuck you. The pressure is coming from them.

... the fact of the matter is that those men, the ones who are close to you, the ones you work with, want to believe you're there and they can fuck you.

Amerikans, by which I mean people who live in the United States, are incredibly juvenile about social change. Robin Morgan called it "ejaculatory politics": if it doesn't happen right away it doesn't happen. The women's movement in this country has all the same characteristics as the culture that we live in, short term gratification, personal fulfilment, personal advancement and yes coming out as a lesbian can get in the way of that. Liberals and left wing men have recolonised women around the fear of the right. This troubles me, it makes me feel like we're really suckers. We've always lived in a world that was right wing. The world has always been right wing to women. A lot of the reasons for the growth and the ascendancy of the right has to do with the status of women. Having some sort of bunker mentality about the right wing, as if you have to protect yourself from contamination by either this political philosophy or these terrible people is not the right way to deal with it. The right way to deal with it is through confrontation and dialogue. I see women doing a lot of political purity trips that have no content to

them. They aren't doing anything except denouncing the right. If you ask them what did you do for women yesterday, there isn't anything and what they could have done they didn't do because they couldn't do everything. In other words, I have to get myself 100% perfect before I dare do anything in the world around me to make it different. That's just nuts. You never will be perfect, we live with our limitations, we live with our failures and I think it's important to do whatever it is you can do and not have all of these very exquisite metaphysical excuses for not having done anything. I'm real old fashioned that way.

... year after year of these men telling me there is no violence here ... he is hitting her – what do you mean there is no violence?

EB: One of the recurring themes in "Letters" is your isolation as a feminist woman writer writing about pornography. Do you think it's inherent in writing that you do it in isolation or are there ways we can come up with new models to support each other and not write in isolation?

AD: There is something inherent in writing that is very solitary and I think that writers come to such awful ends in life because it's almost a total abuse of the human system to use the mind the way you use your mind when you're a writer. But at the time I was writing *Pornography* which was from about 1977 through 1980, there wasn't the support that there would be now. It wasn't just lonely because writing is lonely, it was lonely because feminists did not want to deal with pornography. They wouldn't even consider that this was something that had to be done and that made it much worse. And, basically, I almost died from writing *Pornography*. I couldn't make a living. The book that I published is only one third of the book that I

planned to write, because there was no way that I could keep working on it. I often wonder what would have happened, if I could have written more of it because the next part of the book, the second third of the book, was specifically about how pornography socialises female sexuality. Since so much of the subsequent articles have been around that, it has always felt to me as if I have been operating sort of with an amputated leg. You know, where is that other leg I wanted this book to stand on? But I couldn't survive and continue writing this book. In that way I feel that the women's movement has failed many writers and many women and, yes, it could have been different.

EB: How could it be different if you were writing "Pornography" today?

AD: Partly the book has helped to create the kind of social support that would have made it easier. The politics around pornography have developed in such a way that there's a very solid social consensus about the importance of dealing with the issue. I think that the experience of actually looking at the pornography would always be upsetting and difficult and alienating, but when I was doing the initial work on *Pornography* women wouldn't look at it. The slide shows (put together by Feminists Against Pornography) have made a tremendous difference in women understanding what it is that we are talking about here. But when I wrote the book what I thought was, I have to write down what is in this because women will not look at it and, therefore, part of my job is to tell them what is in this because if they knew they wouldn't be buying all these arguments that these men who use it tell them that it is. It was an extraordinary experience for me. Year after year after year of these men telling me there is no violence here, there is no violence here, there is no violence here, and I'd look at the picture and I'd say that he is hitting her, what do you mean there is no violence? What I basically came to understand is that they were talking about their sexual reaction to the picture. They were never ever talking about what happened to the woman.

I had to go through it from beginning to end to try to figure out what do people mean when they say this; how does this photograph operate in their sexual system, which is not my sexual system. It is not that I haven't been

partially formed by it. I have been. But I also have resisted it and in resisting it that has changed the way I see these pictures. I think that now there is a whole lot more support out there for women who are taking all kinds of risks in relation to pornography. It is still not easy, but there isn't the same kind of isolation. Women have acted against it, women have made it part of an agenda of rebellion against male power. That makes a great difference.

CC: In "A Woman Writer and Pornography" you answer the question so many of us have wanted to ask you which is how you are affected by being immersed in pornography. Would you be willing to expand further on that question and tell us why you are willing to keep immersing yourself in this way?

AD: It's hard to explain. I see pornography as a kind of nerve centre of sexual abuse, of rape, of battery, of incest, of prostitution and I see prostitution and rape as the fundamental realities for women. When I became a feminist which was late compared to many women my age, I was very thrilled by feminist literature and I was very thrilled by feminism. It was enormously, that very misused word, "liberating" for me. But I saw something missing from it too, and I felt that I had some of the missing pieces. If I could contribute my understanding of them, I would make feminism more whole and more living for more women especially for poor women, especially for women in prostitution, especially for women who had experienced sexual torture of any kind and so the commitment really came from that.

EB: Is that partly from your experience of your husband having battered you?

AD: That certainly is part of it. I haven't talked a lot about my whole life in public and the only thing I really have talked about is battery. I've written about it really only twice in nonfiction. There are two essays in *Letters*. I wrote the Hedda Nussbaum one which is at the end of *Letters from a War Zone* (US version) because I felt absolutely urgently that I had to for her sake and partly for my sake too because it brought back so much to me. I was married for three and a half years, that's a very small part of my life but it had a big impact on me because essentially I was tortured and no one who survives that comes out of it unchanged. You either die or you

find some way of using what it is that you know.

There are other things that have to do with it that I don't write about, that I've chosen not to write about, I'm very troubled by the fact that anything I say publicly about myself ends up in the pages of *Hustler*. I don't like my life being turned into pornography for men, I can't stand it. Talk about the chilling effect, it's put a real chill on me, on what I'm willing to talk about and what I'm willing to write about.

... I see pornography as a nerve centre of sexual abuse, of rape, of battery, of incest, of prostitution and I see prostitution and rape as the fundamental realities for women.

EB: Carol Anne Douglas wrote a review of "Intercourse" in "Off Our Backs" June 1987. One of her main criticisms of the book was that you discuss no alternatives to intercourse, no alternative sexuality. She says, "Even criticising lesbianism would be better than ignoring it." How do you respond to that?

AD: I don't agree with it. I decided to write a book about intercourse as an institution of sexual politics and to try and figure out the role of intercourse in the subordination of women. Intercourse has nothing to do with lesbians or lesbian sexuality per se and that's why it's not in the book. Now I remember when I was in England when *Pornography* was published, a woman from one of the radical lesbian groups in England questioned why I never used the word heterosexuality and in a funny way it was the same question. My answer to her was I'm not talking about heterosexuality, I'm talking about male supremacy. Heterosexuality implies that there's an equality within that relationship and that obscures the reality of the man being on top.

Over the last 15 years I've very much refined what my political targets are. My target in the broadest sense is male power. I made a decision about *Intercourse* that had partly to do with the fact that I wanted it to be a thoroughly rigorous book about this particular act. Second, I did not want it to have any shade, shadow or hint of 'the happy ending'. Or any implication that lesbianism was the answer to this particular set of problems because I don't think it is, and if I ever did think it was the lesbian sadomasochists have disabused me of that notion. I can't write about lesbianism that way. My view of what *Intercourse* is is politically different from Carol Anne's notion of what it should be.

... The pornography business is a \$10 billion a year business. It's based on sexualised inequality of women ... you couldn't sell diddly-squat of anything that had to do with equality.

CC: In "Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue", your 1986 testimony before the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, you discuss a definition of erotica articulated by Gloria Steinem. Do you believe that erotica exists and if so can it serve any kind of useful purpose for women?

AD: I don't know if it can exist in this world we live in. I don't think that much of it does exist. I think that the question itself is part of the male agenda around pornography and that's what troubles me so much about the question. There are deep political issues involved in discussing what it means to look at something and have a sexual response to it, especially for women. That question is always used to obscure what the political issues are, as if everything has to do with the product and nothing has to do with what drives a person to need the product. In that sense I

would characterise it as a male question because the male question always is, is there gonna be something left for me? Part of male sexual response is this voyeurism, this objectification as opposed to the way that women have practised sexuality which has more to do with being with someone who is actually alive, three-dimensional or, if you want to be mystical about it, four dimensional in that they also exist in time as well as in space.

I see nothing to preclude that erotica could exist. I have a question as to why people would need it, if they were indeed making love with each other and happy. One of the things that's built into the whole pornography issue is that there are people who have a right to have other people do things so that they can be sexually gratified, kind of servants in a sense. The fact of the matter is that right now there is not an "erotica" market. The pornography business is a \$10 billion a year business and it is growing. It's based on sexualised inequality of women, whether expressed as dominance or expressed as violence against women. You couldn't sell diddly-squat of anything that had to do with equality. I see it as a question that has been a diversionary question for a long time. I don't have any objections to people devoting their lives to creating it, if that's what they want to do. But I think that the women's movement should stop pretending that it's some kind of essential bread and butter or even bread and roses kind of question, because it's not.

When I was working on *Pornography*, this "feminist" definition of erotica did not exist. In all the discourse about pornography, erotica simply means pornography for intellectuals. That's all it means. There is no difference in terms of the place of rape in the pornography, in terms of any kind of violence ranging from flagellation to mutilation. It's strictly a class difference.

Then feminists come along and say, "but we need erotica. We have to be able to say that we like sex. We have to be able to sign our loyalty oath to sexual activity. We have to be able to have these artifacts of sexuality." And I see that having to do a lot with male identification. In other words, we can be like men.

Gloria Steinem tried to do something basically very noble. She tried to use it as a vehicle for pushing forward an idea of

sexuality based on equality. She means it. But most of the people using the word and most of the people who are making the material don't mean it. What they mean is simply pornography. The way that you tell what pornography is frankly you look at the status of women in the material. Is it filled with hatred of women or isn't it? Does it use and violate women or doesn't it? That is really not hard to figure out. We're all formed by this world that we live in. The fact that our sexuality participates in s/m scenarios and is excited by hierarchy and differentials of power and that women are trained basically from birth to eroticise powerlessness and pain should not come as a surprise. The only thing that is a surprise is that a bunch of people would call it feminism and say it's good.

It seems to me that the great misunderstanding is that those of us in the anti-pornography movement have said we are pure, we have nothing to do with that stuff. We have never said that. None of us has ever said that. We've all said that we are fighting pornography because we know what it is. We are fighting for sexual equality because we've experienced inequality. We live in this world. We don't live twelve feet above it. None of us that I have ever heard or seen in my life have made claims of purity, let alone avowals of puritanism. These mischaracterisations have been really just propaganda tools. I see myself as living in this world. I know what sadomasochism is. I know what all those feelings are. I know what all the practices are. I don't think that I am different or better or above it. What I think is that it has to change and that we do not celebrate our powerlessness and call it freedom.

In the same way I have talked at different times about how mainstream media feminists have been corrupted really by the affluence that comes their way and the attention. It's a kind of social wealth even when it's not monetary wealth. It's a kind of identity that most women don't have any way of achieving. So if you're a professional media feminist then you get lots of identity which is a big gift and it's also a very corrupting gift. I often feel that in a funny way, parts of the lesbian community are equally corrupt in that they are totally self-referential. Their idea of feminism has to do only with each other and not with women who are different from them

and not with women who are in different situations than they are. This tends to happen in New York, in Washington, in Philadelphia, in Los Angeles and in San Francisco. In the rest of the country there is much less of it. Whether because it's necessary or by choice I don't know, but lesbians in other parts of the country just simply have got to take the agenda of all women more seriously and I think that helps in diminishing the appeal of this clubhouse sexuality. It's very, "we're special, we're different" which has always been a real problem in the women's movement around lesbianism. We are an elite. Somehow by virtue of being lesbians all this garbage does not have to do with us. I think it's manifested itself at different times in different ways but it's always been a refusal to take male identification among lesbians seriously. It is not just heterosexual women who identify with men. It's very hard for instance to want freedom or to have any ambition or to have any desire to be someone in the world and not identify with men in some way or another. I think that lesbian feminists for a long time have refused to ask ourselves the questions that we've insisted lesbian women ask themselves, as if we're exempt from it all because we're lesbians. We are not exempt from any of it, it just manifests itself differently. The sadomasochism and the lesbian pornography is a very logical expression of that.

... I know what sadomasochism is ... I don't think I am different or better or above it. What I think is that we do not celebrate our powerlessness and call it freedom.

EB: In "Women Lawyers and Pornography" (1980) you say, "whenever you secure for any woman - be she prostitute, wife, lesbian, or all of those and more - one shred of real justice, you have given her and the rest of us a little

more time, a little more dignity: and time and dignity give us the chance to organise, to speak out, to fight back." What does this tell us about strategy?

AD: That goes to my concern about the women's movement losing what I keep calling its middle. That the women who are committed to achieving different kinds of reform and improvements in women's lives, as opposed to changing the complete structure are very important and there are fewer and fewer of them. I think that what it means is that you can save a woman's life by doing something that helps her get past the problem that we have not been socially able to solve. Then she is there. She is somebody who has knowledge, has creativity and she can use those things. I have very strong political beliefs and I do things the way I believe in doing them but I also have at the same time a whole lot of respect for what people who do things differently can achieve. I think that people who work in what I would characterise as the reform part of the movement have very, very little tolerance for people who work in the radical part of it. In other words, they don't understand that we're necessary to them but I think a lot of us understand that they're necessary to us. Every time you help to prolong a woman's life in any way shape or form you give all of us as well as her more of a chance.

... simply acting on pornography and prostitution as urgent political issues includes women in the women's movement who have been excluded until now.

CC: You consistently deal with issues of race and class in your work on violence against women. How does this analysis affect the strategies that could be put forth to combat violence against women which we might adopt as a movement?

AD: It's a really big question. The first thing is that simply acting on pornography and prostitution as urgent political issues includes women in the women's movement who have been excluded until now. All of the pejorative characterisations of the movement as a middle-class movement were in many ways not true, the women's movement always called on and involved women from all sectors of society. But, I would say that a lot of the women who have been involved in the women's movement are on a quest for respectability. They want to be acknowledged as decent whole honest human beings. This is right and fair but there are enormous numbers of women who are living in what amounts to, slavery is not the right word, it's not slavery, it's a barely acknowledged kind of marginality. They too are human beings and they are being used, day in and day out, by men in ways that other women have some kind of protection from. The women's movement has never had anything to do with those women until we began to address pornography, which led to addressing prostitution in a real way not in the liberal way of "let's everybody have a good time and some of us want to be prostitutes."

In that sense, just dealing with the issue has changed the politics of the women's movement and I think a lot of what people call the split in the women's movement is basically a class split. I have seen it that way for years that the women who have used the women's movement to achieve some kind of respectability (which is not to say that they were necessarily born middle class but they became middle class because feminism conferred on them certain professional options that weren't there for them before) want to maintain that respectability above all else. You can not maintain respectability and deal with the status of women in pornography and prostitution at the same time. It's as if women are saying, we don't want the *stink* on us, we just don't, we don't want to smell that way.

In addition, the reason that the Minneapolis civil rights law got passed and the reason that it was the kind of political event that it was, which nobody has ever written about correctly, is because it dealt with the reality of the impact of pornography on poor people and people of colour in cities, which is to say the zoning laws. The fact that politicians put the pornography where people

of colour live. That is true in every city across the country. The ethnic or racial group may change, city to city, Minneapolis is extraordinary, it is 96% white and virtually all the pornography is dumped on 4% of the people who are primarily American Indian which is their term of preference they don't like to be called Native Americans, and Black people. In Boston it's Asians and in Washington it's Blacks. You go across the country and that is the pattern that you see. We built, for the first time, a real coalition among all those people, people who were poor, people who had this happening to them and the very real violence around them increasing because of it and the economic deprivation becoming worse because of it. They all came together to deal with pornography and to deal with every issue of power around pornography, from real estate to corrupt local government to the woman hating to the sexualised racism in pornography itself.

A lot of the battle around pornography has to do with the soul of the women's movement. Is it going to be a movement for women who just want better career chances or is it really going to deal with the way that poor women and women of colour are truly exploited? Again, in Minneapolis, the live sex shows in that town, virtually all the women in them are women of colour. I have never understood how people who claim to be leftist can ignore these facts around pornography, nevertheless they manage to brilliantly. What has happened is that we have broadened the base of the women's movement enormously but we've broadened it to people who don't count. The horrible thing is that they don't count to these white women academics who have their lists of "isms" that they're against. They're just full of correct left wing politics, they deplore racism they just won't do anything about it. They hate poverty mostly they don't want to ever experience it. The fact that essentially the base of the women's movement has broadened because of this work on pornography is utterly meaningless to them because the women are meaningless to them. They don't care about them.

If you see an example of race hate that brings men to orgasm and is being sold for money you do something about it. Are you going to live in the world of theory or are you going to live in the world? What has always been strongest about feminist theory is that

supposedly it has something to do with the world. What we're seeing now is a kind of fracturing of the women's movement into people who live in the world and people who live in the academy. The academy has become the safe place for feminists to be. It's certainly safer than the streets.

... what we're seeing now is a fracturing of the women's movement into people who live in the world and people who live in the academy.

EB: In "Nervous Interview" (1978) the fictional interviewer says, "If the personal is political . . . why aren't you more willing to talk about your personal life?" You give a paragraph answer basically saying that you need privacy to have a personal life and that the press "far exceeds its authentic right to know in pursuing the private lives of individuals . . ." Do you still feel this way and if so could you further explain?

AD: Since I wrote that what has really had a tremendous impact on me personally has been the stuff that pornographers have done to me. I sued *Hustler* for some cartoons of me that essentially turned me into a piece of pornography and the courts said to me, you provoked it, if you want to open your big mouth what the hell do you expect? I went to court and I said I've been raped, these people raped me. They took me, they took my sexuality, they took my body and they made pornography out of it. The court said, well if you hadn't opened your big mouth it wouldn't have happened so it's your fault. I don't understand how anybody is supposed to live with that unless the accommodation that they come to is one of female silence. That you never open your big mouth again.

My understanding of the personal is political also is that what you have experienced

in your personal life has a political dimension to it and you can use what you know in a way that has social value. It wasn't just a personal experience. It was something that has to do with women everywhere in one way or another. In a sense that is where my commitment is now. My commitment is to using what I know in a way that is political.

The issue of fame in this country is a very big one and is a very political one and it's one that I think feminists have been exceptionally mean and miserable about. A lot of women have been destroyed because they become famous in one way or another usually for a very short period of time and the burden that other feminists expect them to carry is one that nobody can carry. You can't carry a burden of purity, you can't carry a burden of being a symbol for other people. You have to continue to operate with respect to your own conscience. You can't be accountable to millions of people. You can't be. You can only be accountable to people that you really know. That is in a sense part of what the difference is. I have to draw a line of accountability and at the same time, increasingly, my behaviour does have an impact on other women that I don't know. Then there is some kind of accountability that I owe them, but what is it?

... you can't carry a burden of purity. You can't carry a burden of being a symbol for other people. You have to continue to operate with respect to your own conscience.

There are a lot of things I would like to talk about, and I do not want to read about them in *Hustler*. I don't want my life used against me, I want to use my life for women. That's the part I really do not know how to deal with. Where I think that there are personal experiences that it's appropriate for me to talk about now, I will not talk about them. I can't. When people talk about

freedom of speech, and all of these civil liberties assholes go into court about what is going to chill speech somewhere for someone. I mean I want to tell you that my speech is fucking freezing to death and I am a writer and it does matter what has happened to me and it does matter how I learned what it is that I know and women do have a right to have some idea of what those things are and the pornographers in collusion with the courts have been successful in creating a social environment where I can not survive having that discussion. My speech is as chilled as it can be.

CC: Do you find that talking about your life can be done more through fiction?

AD: I am working on a novel now and I wrote *Ice and Fire* and I think a lot of people choose to deal with things through fiction and let me emphasise when I say that that it is fiction. It's not documentary reality, but yes it's easier to deal with through fiction. Dealing with anything through fiction does not protect you from this kind of assault. For instance, some boys published a book this summer that said all kinds of horrible things about me including that I assaulted a particular woman. It had a quote from her saying that she said this. Now I have an affidavit from her saying that she didn't say it and that it never happened and in fact it never happened. What they use to buttress their arguments about what kind of person I am are largely quotes from my fiction. They quote from my short stories as if they are talking about me. What they are trying to say is that I'm a pornographer, I'm a dominatrix and they compare me to the Marquis de Sade. In doing so all of their evidence is taken from the fiction.

EB: The question I wanted to ask you has to do with you living with John Stollenberg. Why have you chosen to do that?

AD: We've been living together now over 15 years and we live together because we deeply love each other and that is the answer to the question. I have always felt that the way in which I was accountable to the women's movement was through my work, that if my work continued to be what it should be then there was no question about it that I had to answer. In the early days when we lived together it was very rough. I couldn't walk into a room without being called names

because John and I lived together. Now people seem to have taken an attitude of benign indifference. I think that his work has been very important too. He has done a lot of organising against pornography and his book *Refusing to be a Man* is a brilliant and unique book. But that's not why we live together. He is a very kind person and we really love each other.

CC: One of the powerful statements in "Letters" addresses the issue of censorship. You note in "Voyage in the Dark: Hers and Ours" (1987) that the work of Jean Rhys was obliterated. You go on to say, "I don't know why we now, we women writers, think our books are going to live." What do you suggest that women do so that the writings of women of this generation are not also obliterated?

AD: That is a really important and hard question. *Sexual Politics* is out of print. *Dialectic of Sex* is out of print. What women have to do is to come to terms with the fact that we live in a society that simply censors better than state censorship. People have got to come to terms with the power of the publishing industry and the media in controlling thought and expression. They have to understand that it is an issue of power and money and people have to be less passive in relation to books. People have to take their money which they don't have much of and they have to buy books by feminist writers. They have to develop a much more sophisticated understanding of how the book industry works. A hard cover book like *Letters from a War Zone* was virtually published dead. If it's still in bookstores in two months it will be a miracle. They have to understand that everything that they hear all the time about how everything can be published in this country is a lie and that part of the social function of the publishing industry is to buy up the right to and then obliterate certain books so that nobody can get them. They have to stop thinking that they live in the liberal dream world of equality where fairness has already been achieved. It hasn't been achieved. You can be equal in your heart but it doesn't make you equal in the world. I think that the refusal to understand what happens to books by women goes along with this liberal refusal to acknowledge that power is a reality and we're not the ones who have it. What I'm saying is

that women have got to start facing reality. You cannot build any kind of movement for change on wishful thinking. The wishful thinking is that we already have what it is we want and what it is we need. We don't have it. Women who want to write and communicate, which in a big country is hard to do, it's getting harder for them, not getting easier. There isn't more access, there is less access. People have got to take the economics of the publishing industry seriously and understand that very few writers will survive who do not write according to the demands of the marketplace, by which I mean essentially the demands of turning out books that you can consume as passively as a television show. That's sort of the standard.

... do something. You don't have to do everything. You don't have to be perfect, you don't have to be pure. Do what you can do.

EB: Is there anything else you want to say?

AD: I want to say more than anything that the women's movement has a chance to do something miraculous which is to really tear down these hierarchies of sex and race and class. We can do it but the way that you do it is not through rhetorical denunciations of injustice. You do it through attacking institutions of injustice through political action. That hasn't changed. That's what we have to do. The other thing I would like to say is, *do something*. You don't have to do everything. You don't have to be perfect, you don't have to be pure, do what you can do. Do it. Life is short and you don't know when it is going to end for you so do it, do it now. □

Andrea Dworkin's new novel *Mercy* will be published in the UK this autumn by Secker & Warburg.

Turning Us Off

'Feminist Review's latest issue focuses on 'perverse politics', promising a radical challenge to feminist 'orthodoxy'. Davina Cooper and Didi Herman expose a familiar liberalism underlying the bravado of these lesbian sexual outlaws.

"Far from retreating, we have moved more deeply into an exploration of our desires, lusts and ambivalences..." So speaks the latest and lesbian edition of *Feminist Review*, focusing on lesbian sexuality and culture. Yet, despite the editorial collective's stated aim of providing a forum for exploring theoretical and practical developments within a radical sexual politics, *Feminist Review* does not bring together a diverse collection of articles from lesbian feminist positions. Rather, a consistent and coherent theme runs throughout most of the pieces. *Feminist Review* condemns feminism's radical project of politicizing sexuality, and instead substitutes a 'postmodern' liberal analysis.

"Perverse Politics" (the title of this issue) includes articles on a number of different issues. There are pieces on 'The GLC Experience', international concerns, and a consideration of the writing of Audre Lourde. However, these articles are marginalised by what appears to be the editors' main agenda.

At the core of "Perverse Politics" is a series of articles on lesbian sexuality and identity. Inge Blackman and Kathryn Perry discuss lesbian fashion for the 90s, describing what different groups of lesbians wear and why. Susan Ardill and Sue O'Sullivan raise questions regarding the social meaning of

butch/femme. There is an interview with lesbian AIDS activist Cindy Patton which in the words of interviewer Sue O'Sullivan "explores some of the cultural determinants of lesbian sexuality" in the context of AIDS. And Cherry Smyth and Sara Dunn, by examining lesbian pornography, set out to question its strategic value within feminist ideology.

Revolutionary feminism

The theoretical centre-piece of this collection is an article by Margaret Hunt entitled "The DeEroticization of Women's Liberation: Social Purity Movements and the Revolutionary Feminism of Sheila Jeffreys". This article, more than any other, sets out *FR* 34's critique of radical feminism and proffers its pleasure-centred alternative.

Hunt's main strategy is to equate Jeffreys' feminism with 19th century social purity movements, attacking the former by 'exposing' the latter as bourgeois, patronizing and conservative. The second part of the article focuses on what Hunt defines as the social purity movements of the 1980s against porn, SM and 'degradation'. Here Hunt draws out the alliances she believes were formed between revolutionary feminists and rightwing forces. Unfortunately there is no proper

examination as to why many feminists opposed violent and male-oriented sexual practices. Rather than responding to feminists' critique of heterosexuality, Hunt argues that revolutionary feminism's main objective has been a moralistic one — to protect women from male lust and to purify sexual relations. This involves "constructing . . . lesbians who do SM as a group separate from and less human than everyone else" and campaigning for anti-pornography legislation despite the fact "some women like and feel empowered by pornography". Hunt's article raises too many questions for us to respond to here. Our aim is to use her article as a basis for examining the politics being promoted by this issue of *Feminist Review* more generally.

Perverse Politics has been pronounced "one of the founding manifestos of (an) as-yet-unnamed movement" by Linda Semple writing in the left wing London magazine *City Limits* (31 May, 1990). What then does this manifesto commit itself to? Above all else, it is about the primacy of pleasure. Practices are uncritically validated by the enjoyment they give: "It is vital to write of what really gets us wet, not what we think ought to get us wet" (Pat Califia, quoted by Sara Dunn). If you enjoy wearing stilettos that's fine, if you enjoy bondage that's fine, if you enjoy fucking men, well, that's fine too. Sara Dunn describes in some detail the "erotic charge" of a "self-possessed butch . . . repeatedly and ritually fucked by three policemen". Is anything *not* fine? *FR* 34 leaves the question open — which is perhaps one of this 'manifesto's few redeeming qualities.

Challenging feminist wisdom

This edition aims to be daring by breaking perceived feminist wisdom. Yet the underlying analysis and ideals, far from being radical or innovative, are conservative and traditional, drawing heavily on 19th century liberalism, now resurfacing within modern rightwing thinking and practice. We outline below some of the main components of this analysis.

Firstly, there is the dualism between public and private, based on a model of society as divided into separate spheres: one male, one female; one political and regulated, one a-political and unregulated. The advent of feminism exploded this traditionally assumed



...AN' A
LEMON
POPSICLE
FOR THE CHICK...



Cath Jackson

polarisation by arguing that domestic and personal lives were as political and in need of intervention as the public sphere largely inhabited by men. Yet *FR* 34's position on this is suprisingly unclear. Either they accept the traditional distinction which allows for a libertarian politics of the personal, or else their free choice, anti-regulatory perspective must be intended to apply to the economy, public provision and anti-discriminatory legislation as well.

'Naive and dangerous'

This confusion is illustrated in *FR 34*'s position on pornography. The collective's editorial claims that feminist campaigns against pornography "that call for state censorship" demonstrate a naive and dangerous conception of how the state works. Yet, they have also chosen to include in this edition articles that defend porn itself as potentially liberating. What is unclear is whether we are being asked to suspect the state's ability to act in our interests as women, to suspect feminists who tell us pornography is dangerous, or endorse a liberal 'keep the state off our backs' approach to the so-called 'private sphere'? Each of these positions has important and differing implications; the *FR 34* articles obscure rather than illuminate such questions.

Another tenet of liberalism adopted by Hunt and others is the concept of "subjective interests". Radical theories from Marx onwards have argued that since people absorb dominant values and beliefs their real interests are not necessarily what they perceive them to be. Liberal and libertarian philosophies, on the other hand, contend that first, people know what is really in their interests and second, they should be allowed to act on such knowledge. In her article Margaret Hunt adopts this latter approach as implicitly more feminist since it validates equally all women's choices and acknowledges we know what's best for ourselves. The assumption is that if women consent then they are giving their free consent, since to imply that they are being forced when no overt coercion is visible is both patronizing and demeaning.

We agree that it can be arrogant to tell a woman who has spent her life raising a family that her choice to do so was not a free one. To suggest on the other hand, that people make choices on the basis of a range of equally accessible options is obviously nonsense; as lesbians, we know the pressures placed on people to be heterosexual. Similarly, women have consented to many things throughout history which, as feminists, we cannot believe were in their own interests. Nor is everything that is in some women's interests good: war, the oppression of others (including other women) and economic exploitation, to list a random few.

But arguing this does not patronize women as Hunt suggests. Rather, this analysis

is about understanding how the decisions we make are affected or shaped by the social and economic environment in which we live — where both ideologies and material constraints operate. It is *this* which *FR 34* chooses to ignore in relation to women. Yet, how can we discount ideologies, particularly dominant ones which influence the way we perceive the world and the ways in which we understand and evaluate our choices?

Choosing our values

To say there is no such thing as ideology means either that things have an intrinsic and therefore fixed meaning (proved historically to be untrue) or that there are no dominant understandings, values or beliefs into which we are socialized; that we simply choose our values and beliefs as if from a supermarket shelf of options. Clearly, if ideology does not exist, then dressing up as master and slave has no connotations — but then why else would you want to do it; where did the idea come from in the first place? S/M sex is experienced as erotic *because* of its connotations. It is the relationship between sex, power and violence within dominant ideology that gives S/M meaning and constructs its erotic possibilities. A further illustration of this is rape fantasies. That feminists' often fail to overcome such fantasies clearly demonstrates how deeply entrenched and powerful dominant ideological images and symbols are in our collective sexual imagination.

Aside from ideology, the second set of factors the writers ignore are social and economic constraints. There is a serious lack of putting things in context in most of *FR 34*'s articles. Kathryn Perry and Inge Blackman for example, discussing lesbian style, do not mention how poverty might affect a lesbian's fashion choices. Similarly, the women appearing in the lesbian porn videos described by Cherry Smyth are presumed to have consented, without any discussion of the factors which might have led to their decision to participate.

These, then, are some of the politics *FR 34* shares with 19th century liberalism. But this is also a liberalism for the '90s, informed by current 'postmodernist' thinking which, amongst other things, suggests that we as individuals have the power to shape and determine meaning.

-a femme's a
femme — but would
ya believe
floral nylon
sheets?!



Cath Jackson

The meaning of power

Power is a concept feminism has traditionally approached in two distinct, although seemingly contradictory ways: first, as a negative characteristic relating to one group or individual's control over another and second, as a positive quality implying increased capacity — "sisterhood is powerful". However the postmodern feminism of the *FR 34* sexuality articles merges these two

meanings so that the expression of power by one woman (or man?) over another becomes a liberating activity that empowers both.

This is a dangerous development. The fusion of these two incompatible notions legitimises the eroticisation of 'power over'. *FR 34* constantly and almost exclusively identifies sex with power, "Acute political understandings of the workings of power in terms of sexuality, class and race can be the driving force behind lesbian pornography" (p. 164). While "pure" politically correct sex, which according to Hunt, "radically rejects anything which . . . might seek to perpetuate victimisation", is ignored or derided. The implications of this for a radical theory of power are enormous.

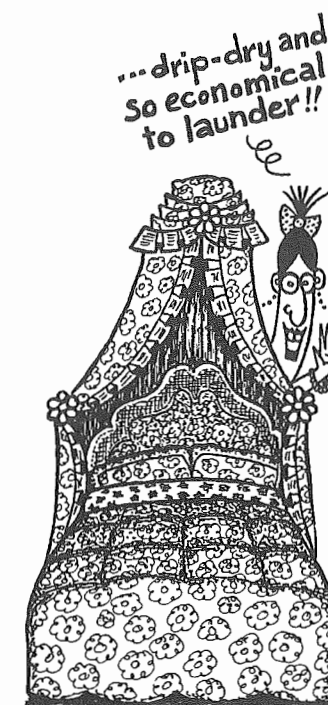
To begin with it implies we can overcome oppression and negative experiences by creating and eroticising power differentials. Sue O'Sullivan for example, talks about using SM as a way of dealing with childhood sexual abuse (see interview with Cindy Patton); elsewhere it is suggested we can negotiate around systems of oppression through our sexual practice, exploring 'creatively' what it means to have power over others.

Such ways of thinking depoliticise the very meaning of power, which is at the core of oppression. If power is something we can create and change at will, then oppression is neither structurally maintained nor really that terrible.

Lipstick and miniskirts

Similar problems exist with the way *FR 34* conceptualises cultural change. Some of the articles take a liberal stance, rejecting any concern over meaning. Others however argue that although some practices like wearing lipstick and miniskirts have negative connotations, their oppressive meanings can be transformed through a process of "engaging in and redefining such activities".

Meanings can and do change, but whilst they are not rigid, neither are they as fluid as postmodernists like to suggest. Shaved legs may be an expression of personal preference by the woman who shaves hers, but to other people they reinforce the notion that women are and should be hairless (with its connotations of pre-pubescent sexuality). What about the lesbian with shaved legs, accompanied by DMs and leather miniskirt?



Does such a combination transform the meanings of each item as *FR* 34 suggests, or is the wearer perceived as a synthesis of different messages, whilst what is signified by each piece of clothing remains unchanged? We would suggest that transforming the ways in which clothing (or anything else) is understood is a far more complex and *collective* process than the article on fashion suggests.

How we present ourselves is political in terms of what is signified (for example, wearing a dog collar or Nazi cap) in terms of the international economic and environmental implications of such consumerism and the physical effects of clothing or cosmetics on our health and bodies. We must also come to grips with the attraction that conventional meanings hold. Why, for example, do so many women peroxide their hair? Would it happen in a society where notions of beauty were not informed by racism?

Finally, we want to comment on the implications of reducing lesbianism to nothing more than a sexual and cultural choice. The limitations of this perspective are expressed in several ways throughout the pages of this journal. First, there is no discussion of the politics of heterosexuality nor of its relationship with lesbianism. Yet the latter cannot be understood outside the context of a broader sexual politics. Attempts to explore a different concept of erotica and to create a personal life that is non-oppressive and non-exploitative, pre-figuring a different kind of society, have always been at the root of feminism. It is this radical potential of feminism which is undermined by feminists who advocate or defend age-old patriarchal practices such as porn and S/M.

When lesbians could be lesbians

Second, *FR* does not apply the concepts of lesbian feminism outside the area of lesbian sexuality. Radical feminism is attacked for the analytical primacy it gives to gender and sexuality, yet this is just what this series of articles repeats. It is difficult to believe that 'empowerment' through porn and S/M is the primary concern of most lesbians. What

relevance do these articles have to the lives that we lead?

Lesbian feminism as a set of principles and practices that aims to shape our personal lives and public institutions is much broader in its concerns than whom we sleep with and how. Whilst our sexual practices have important implications, issues such as work, education, transport, health, and housing comprise many of the primary concerns for most people, including lesbians. Feminism has an important contribution to make to the way the whole of society should be restructured and developed.

Unfortunately, *FR* 34 does not take us in this direction. In fact, it heads us back in time, to the glorious days of liberalism. These sexuality articles are, in this sense, reactionary, harkening back to a mythical past, to a pre-'feminist orthodoxy', where 'lesbians could be lesbians'. Despite claims to oppose feminist rule-making, the contributors are nonetheless composing their own sacred text. Soon perhaps they will take things a stage further and tell us lesbianism is as *passé* as feminism.

We may have an uneasy feeling because we are not supposed to be turned on by pricks, we may feel this threatens our very identity as lesbians – but it is time to get away from the idea that we can all be "lesbian separatist masturbators" (Sara Dunn).

Does *FR* 34 really believe it can "challenge" rightwing "onslaughts" in this way? Power, pleasure and degradation: what is depressing about these articles is how little of what they offer us is new. The writers rely on traditional Freudian psychology, and the free speech arguments of American pornographers and racists – we've heard it all before. What is dangerous about these articles is that they appropriate this old stuff and call it "lesbian feminism".

To create a truly radical opposition, it is necessary to examine some of the values dismissed and despised in this issue, as in our right wing society at large, such as equality and nurturing. We may not need a feminist moralism but we do need a feminist ethics. With that at the core perhaps we could build a radical sexual politics. □

Editorial Note: "Postmodernism" – a theoretical concept which, amongst other things, suggests that there is no fixed meaning in anything.

THE PORTABLE CAGE

Religious conformity can never offer freedom to women, argues Dena Attar. Here she highlights the rise of religious fundamentalism worldwide and questions the meaning of the veil, the sheitel and the hijab.

If you count yourself part of christendom, this is for you. If you don't, it's also for you – a reminder that christendom is still where you're living.

There used to be an old joke about a stock response to news of any event: is it good or bad for the Jews? Now we have another one of our own: is it good or bad for women? The events in Eastern Europe since last year have forced both those questions on us; the images of strong communist states have fractured and they stand revealed to us as earthquake countries. Amid the dust and rubble the power of the Christian church, hidden before or perhaps grown stronger recently, is once more visible.

And this is only one example. From a constant stream of such examples, I note four recent news items: the Catholic hierarchy is issuing new edicts re-affirming in the strongest terms its hostility to abortion, contraception, divorce, and all things feminist; the collapsed Israeli government has managed to reform as a working coalition only with the aid of some extreme right-wingers and ultra-religious

elements; the British foreign minister, under pressure, made some political statements about the government's highest respect for Islam and its moral code; the American president of the international writers' union PEN reported a rising tide of censorship in the USA, particularly of school books, at the behest of the fundamentalist religious Right.

I take all these things personally, as I think all feminists must. Mary Daly's words, published in *God the Father* in 1973, now read extraordinarily:

As the women's movement begins to have its effect upon the fabric of society, transforming it from patriarchy into something that never existed before . . . it can become the greatest single challenge to the major religions of the world, Western and Eastern. Beliefs and values that have held sway for thousands of years will be questioned as never before.

In the early '70s it was possible to believe that religion was in retreat, that feminism could make the great challenge without meeting much of a reply. Since 1979 – the year of the Iranian revolution, of the ascent of the radical



Right in Britain and the start of the Reagan campaign for the US presidency which vowed support to anti-abortionists – it has no longer been possible. The extent and viciousness of the backlash becomes clearer all the time.

It's also becoming clearer that we are virtually on our own. Daly is right to describe feminism as the greatest challenge, if we treat feminism only as an idea. But historically the greatest challenge has been posed at a theoretical level by Marxism and, in the struggle for real power, by totalitarian states claiming to put Marxism into practice. As the power of those states wanes, the left everywhere seems to have lost its ability to provide a critical analysis of religion, or to offer an alternative political faith. Now, when millions of women are falling victim to the rise of fundamentalism, have feminists also gone weak on religion? I am desperately afraid that we have. I want to understand why. I want us to talk about how much that matters.

Confusions and contradictions

The feminist response so far has been so contradictory that it allows for all kinds of confusions; a range of responses, from conservatism to denial and dissociation, are being claimed as feminist. While I'm writing this I have four other women in mind. They've all been touched by feminism, know how to use its language, and may even call themselves feminists. The first, a Bradford woman, told me she could not discuss the Salman Rushdie affair because as a non-Moslem it was not up to her to have a view. The second, Rana Kabbani, published *Letter to Christendom* in response to the Rushdie affair. The third featured in a TV programme and refused to be filmed praying behind her brother because she did not wish to be used in a stereotyped portrayal of oppressed Moslem womanhood. The fourth, in another interview, dismissed criticisms of the *chador*, saying it was just a piece of cloth.

I shall start with the piece of cloth, and with what Selma Ekrem, who was a young girl in Turkey around the time of the first world war, called "the hat question". It was a continual torment to her. Her autobiography was called *Unveiled*, in reference to the hat question, which was by no means trivial. Still a child, she had to worry that her father would be imprisoned because she and her

sister wore hats instead of the hated veils and headscarves they were supposed to wear. This was no exaggerated fear. The local police wrote ordering him to ensure that they were "covered". Selma could not give in despite these threats, even though it struck her as unfair for her father to suffer through her own stubbornness. Soon the threat of punishment stretched to the girls themselves, and her sister gave way. They were jeered at and insulted in the street, accused of betraying their country and their religion. Selma's will to resist did not break. She wrote of the black folds of the *tscharshaf* hanging "like a lead over my life", and of her anger that even in wartime the government still bothered to insist that she had no right to wear a hat instead. Wearing a hat was so nerve-racking and fraught with danger (and going bareheaded was never even an option) that her first thoughts about the new postwar Turkish government were on its attitude to women. Would she be allowed to look for work, without a veil?

Selma Ekrem saw the enforced wearing of the *tscharshaf* as an assault on women and girls, a denial of freedom. It forced her into exile, where she replied to the romantic imaginings of American friends asking her about Turkish life:

How would you like to have your face covered with a thick veil and look at the world only through that black curtain from the time you are thirteen or so?

The debate has moved closer to the West since Selma Ekrem's time, and taken new forms. I grew up seeing Orthodox Jewish women in a nearby London district wearing the *sheitel*, a wig covering their own hair in traditional fashion so that only their husbands might see their natural hair. The *sheitel* was easily dismissed as an abhorrent survival of bygone times, worn by women with no interest in feminist debate whatsoever. They can still be seen, but now I am more used to seeing the varieties of modest head-coverings worn by Moslem women. There is now a debate, and it is no longer only the one which pits the rhetoric of feminism and freedom against religious and patriotic conformity. Some defenders of *hijab* claim now that they are the truest feminists, since those claiming to side with freedom are really siding with sexual exploitation, western decadence or, most tellingly, with racism.



A simple piece of cloth

Is it a sideshow, a western obsession, a racist fuss about a simple piece of cloth? Rana Kabbani argues that *hijab* has now become a political choice for Moslem women, enabling them to form networks and work together more effectively, and is a symbol of rejection of western values and permissiveness. Debates about sexuality, important for western feminism, were an irrelevant luxury for Middle Eastern women: the example Kabbani cites is of a Palestinian guerrilla fighter at an International Women's Day conference in Scandinavia, bewildered by being "exposed to hour-long speeches by European feminists on lesbian rights". I quote this to point out that the version of liberation she goes on to describe has its boundaries, acknowledged or not.

The women who decide to put on the *hijab*, that flag of Islamic commitment, are not retreating from ground won by their grandmothers. Just as it was a political choice fifty years ago to remove the *hijab*, a choice freely made and of great consequence, so the decision today to put it

on again is equally momentous and equally political.

These women are not withdrawing to an archaic past, nor do they wish to stay demurely at home... Wearing the *hijab* can be a liberation, freeing women from being sexual objects...

The picture Rana Kabbani advances of a politically active Muslim sisterhood consisting mainly of professional women who have freely chosen to wear *hijab*, and are released by it from family surveillance, the "trap of western dress" and even class difference (she argues that "since all women look the same in it, it is a most effective equaliser") is so selective as to be untenable. Kabbani seeks to minimise the religious connection, or at least to see it as something controllable, and to portray fundamentalism as an allied but separate phenomenon. But just as class inequality does not disappear simply because people look the same, the purpose and uses of religious laws still remain even when women voluntarily opt for respectability and safety under the cloak of religious conformity.

Set against the notion of middle-class,





politicised women adopting *hijab* as a liberating choice is the evidence of feminist researchers, activists and refugees from Muslim countries around the world. Seager & Olson, in their book *Women in the World*, cite two countries where wearing the veil is still compulsory for women, and four others where most women are veiled and presumably have little real choice. This factual background makes it hard enough to see wearing *hijab* as a progressive choice for women. The idea that the veil is some kind of neutral symbol which can be appropriated for women's own purposes, does not stand up to analysis either. Could the same choice be shown by women with shorn hair who wear the *sheitel*, and claimed by them as liberating? It seems unlikely, yet the rationale behind the *sheitel* is exactly the same: preserving a woman's modesty and keeping her from being seen as a sex object; reserving her charms for her husband, and protecting men from temptation.

Other writers who do not share the view that the veil is a reclaimable neutral symbol (Edward Said has described the *chador* as a "portable cage") argue either that it is expressive of a basic hostility towards female sexuality, or that it serves to mark out all public space as male, to be entered by women only on condition that they effectively become invisible. Fatima Mernissi, in *Beyond the Veil*, makes a useful distinction between a woman claiming the right to be in a public place and justifying her presence there. Whatever the wearer's motives, the message of *hijab* is still that a woman's presence in the world outside

home must be in some way justified. Whatever the circumstances which lead to this, we cannot mistake this for feminism or liberation.

It remains true that at certain times, in certain places, many women have seen it as being in their interests to adopt *hijab*. Last year, during a fortnight of events for Iranian women, a panel discussion on the situation of women in Iran since the revolution reached a consensus that this had been, effectually, a despair position. Westernisation under the Shah had undermined cultural self-esteem and also added to women's burdens, so that many felt they had nothing to lose by supporting the fundamentalist revival. Fundamentalists of different religions share an emphasis on a traditional role for women; they promise support for women by at least promoting the idea that women with children should be able to stay at home and be financially supported by men. Women overburdened both at home and at work may well have seen this as desirable, although the reality they were then faced with was very different: virtual sexual apartheid, a diminishment of legal rights and status, sanctions against women not wearing the *chador* or not supported by men, and no relief, in the end, from overwork and poverty. Yet as Andrea Dworkin has argued in *Right-wing Women*, about the American religious Right, conservatism does have an understandable appeal for women because it offers respectability, protection and male support. These seem at first much surer bets than the dangerous freedoms of feminism.

Right to rebel

Ideologically *hijab* can't be reclaimed for feminism, but feminist support for women's struggles has to include support both for those who refuse to wear it and are persecuted – as in Iran – and those who do, and are also persecuted. There were milder examples of the latter in French and British schools recently, where Muslim girls wishing to wear scarves were sent home. I heard from refugees here of more extreme examples in Iraq, where a woman allied to the fundamentalist cause could face a long prison sentence for her beliefs and her encouragement of *hijab* (even though the veil is still fairly traditional amongst Iraqi women). It is absolutely clear that we must support the rebellious women and girls in every such case, punished for their

refusal to conform to authority. It would be highly dangerous, though, for us to confuse support for the right to rebel, to oppose racism, and to wear what we want, with support for the adoption of fundamentalism in itself, even as a strategy. The main task for us has to be to see that women looking for ideologies, strategies and refuges to relieve them from oppression always have somewhere else to go.

Rana Kabbani wrote her *Letter to Christendom* primarily as a response to the Rushdie affair, and to an article by Fay Weldon which many other readers also thought gratuitously offensive. The *Letter* combines its essentially conservative arguments about religion with a spirited attack on Western anti-Islamic racism, but also with a rather more subtle attack on *The Satanic Verses* and its author. A very different response to the Rushdie affair came from Southall Black Sisters, who came together with supporters from other religious backgrounds in May 1989 to set up Women Against Fundamentalism.

I have found it striking that since the beginning of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* there have been just two groups, very different, affirming unwavering and total support for Rushdie and the book's publication, and without any racist taint. One is Women Against Fundamentalism; the other, the organisations (like PEN) which represent writers internationally, and oppose censorship throughout the world. Both groups have made connections, have offered the clearest analyses and have expressed a solidarity which is not about slogans or distant principles but about our own lives and freedoms. Each of them, as I do, takes the Rushdie affair personally. Each has been able to see the allegedly anti-racist opposition to the book for what it is: a convenient means for the fundamentalist leadership to assert its power and suppress dissent.

I heard virtually identical comments recently, about attempts to blame Rushdie for the fate of hostages in Lebanon, from a WAF spokeswoman and from Nadine Gordimer addressing a meeting organised by PEN. In comparison, the woman I spoke to who didn't have a view, who thought it wasn't her place to have a view, cannot have needed to know where she stood. Some of us need to know, because we know we are the real targets of

censorship too. We think the thoughts we are not supposed to think; we write the words others must not be allowed to read.

The first activity organised by WAF, their picket of the May 1989 anti-Rushdie demonstration, showed up dramatically the scale of the opposition to feminist dissenters from religious communities. Since then WAF has organised a benefit (jointly with 'Voices for Rushdie') and a public meeting addressing the rise of fundamentalism around the world.

These have not been simply events dealing with a threat far off, to be discussed and analysed. They have all taken place in a climate of threat, which for some women has been real and urgent. The May picket was a frightening experience; at the summer benefit, where the atmosphere was still tense, some of the expected performers felt unable to appear; at the public meeting one woman at risk of being deported to Pakistan and imprisoned there for 'adultery' (the crime of having been abducted and raped) spoke of what had happened to her as a direct result of Pakistan's adoption of religious law.

Double threat

Most of the speakers at WAF's public meeting, reporting on the rise of fundamentalist religious movements in Iran, Ireland, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Israel, Africa and Eastern Europe, pointed out a double threat. One is direct – attacks on women's reproductive rights and on the right of women to be educated, to work, to be politically active, to resist unwanted marriage, abuse or mutilation. The other is at least as dangerous:



attacks on secular democracy and attempts to increase the power of religious or communal leaders in the political arena, so that the civil law can be usurped by religious laws which inevitably accord women fewer rights.

Several speakers dealt with the problem of how fundamentalism still manages to attract so many women. Part of its attraction is that, like fascism, it mobilises supporters against external enemies, and thus *appears* to empower women. Religious practice gives women an alternative source of power, as Nira Yuval-Davis argued, in the sense that it provides an alternative source of authority which they can use for negotiating their lives, to balance the power of the men nearer to them. This feeling of empowerment encourages women to become involved. Another speaker, Effua Graham, described the wealth of the American Pentecostal churches which were buying their way into Ghana, drawing towards them vast numbers of the women who bear the brunt of the country's economic crises.

There were some positive reports too of a growing resistance, particularly amongst disillusioned Iranian women, and in Bangladesh where feminists see the importance of keeping a secular constitution and fighting to resist a clause denoting Islam as the state religion. There appears to be an emerging consensus that feminists should, as far as possible, seek to use the civil law to defend women against religious laws. In the case of women threatened by anti-adultery laws in their countries of origin, for instance, we should seek to establish their entitlement to refugee status as victims of political persecution. Similarly, French feminists have sought legal protection for women whose male relatives wish to force them into marriage, by defining such actions as kidnap and abduction and seeking to ensure that the French government acts to protect its citizens, even when the woman concerned has been taken overseas.

Working with our own minority communities or else in alliance with other feminists, we are bound to meet the charges of colluding with racism or of betrayal. These are also the charges Rana Kabbani levels at Rushdie as the author of *The Satanic Verses*: that it has set back the cause of anti-racism, that it is written purely for a western readership, that Rushdie has failed to hold

himself properly accountable to his own community. Such accusations rest on the assumption that there is one ready-defined community and that we are not free to challenge its definition. They are tactics for controlling dissidents, as Southall Black Sisters have had cause to recognise and as other speakers agreed, but they can only succeed if we submit to the judgment that freethinkers or feminists, radicals, atheists, critics of religion, must forfeit their right to belong to their original communities.

Where to go?

Having challenged, often in the name of feminism, the beliefs, practices and allegiances we start off with, we can't just move into a new community waiting ready to accept us. I used often to hear that I had no choices other than to continue with Orthodox Judaism or be swallowed up into the larger society which was Christian and antisemitic. It was a false threat in some ways: I haven't continued with Orthodoxy, and I haven't been swallowed up. But in another way the dichotomy is real, since the existence of those communities is more continuous, more tangible, than that of any other which might fit my feminist commitment. Feminism isn't somewhere else to go that we can really get up and go to, but a framework for understanding and changing our current realities. And feminism, as I understand it, has no place for religion, let alone fundamentalism. If it isn't a refuge or a parallel faith which can quietly co-exist, feminism should be, as Daly suggested, the greatest single challenge to the major religions of the world.

So what has happened? Since the early '70s, feminists have adopted one of three different approaches to religion. The first, most conservative approach, dealt with change at the most superficial level without confronting the basic framework of religious law. Within this approach women sought to rewrite texts avoiding masculine pronouns, applied to enter religious hierarchies, campaigned to alter religious law and tradition as far as interpretations of the law themselves would allow. Some got to where they wanted and stayed content with that, in spite of some criticism from other feminists (see, for instance, Gail Chester's article "A woman needs a God like a fish needs a

bicycle" in *Walking on the Water* – now, surprise, out of print). Some others reached the limits of change this approach allowed and were driven beyond it, an experience which could cause acute distress (one such account by Daphne Hampson appears in another anthology, *Speaking of Faith*).

The next approach was either deeper or dafter, depending on your sympathies. It denounced the patriarchal character of existing religions and attempted to unearth through historical research a truly woman-centred alternative. Failing that, it simply gave up the historical quest and made the whole thing up. Such matriarchalist fantasies are open to the charge of racism – dumping blame on particular groups said to have invented patriarchal religions at the expense of matriarchal ones – and also to the charge of failing to understand the cultural and political significance of religion itself in all its multi-dimensional forms. It is not so easy to dismiss or overtake the accomplishments of millennia of religious thought and practice, and the alternative constructions of this approach have little to offer so far. No born-again pseudo-witchcraft tree-worshipping cult is going to be able to compete with the achievements of the golden age of Islamic civilisation, for example, no matter what compensatory values it advances. The cultural forms evolved by existing religions carry meanings from so many sources that to invent overnight replacements with as much emotional resonance is really an impossible task.

The patriarchal religions to be replaced in this approach are also much more than political movements setting out to enforce patriarchy. With all their faults they are also ethical systems, providing a language with which to contest oppression, to set out moral obligations and to establish concepts of human rights. This makes it unnecessary for feminists to begin again in every detail, as if no work had ever been done before us. A more convincing approach to religion would start by evaluating its achievements as well as its crimes.

The last approach to religion is the one I miss the most – the one which, in theory if not in daily reality, would give us a place to stand. It is a rational one, capable of analysing religion in relation to patriarchy and to systems such as feudalism and capitalism; one which

sees feminism as a political analysis and movement incompatible with systems of religious law allegedly divinely given and with systems of irrational thought alike. Because it's the least respectful and least tolerant, it's been the quietest tendency of late: feminists have been too busy absorbing lessons in anti-racism, or have fallen victim to the latest fashions in horoscopes and crystals. It asks the nastiest questions about our silliest beliefs and most comfortable allegiances, and insists that all of it matters and counts towards the extremes of fundamentalism, nationalism, Zionism and racism.

The Feminist Book Fortnight catalogue lists *Letter To Christendom*, but does not list *Against the Grain*, which records the first ten years of Southall Black Sisters' existence and the origins of Women Against Fundamentalism. Publicly, feminism seems to have sided more with the conservatives than with the dissidents, but there is now much more to do. WAF is currently campaigning on reproductive rights and has picketed the Irish embassy to protest at Irish women being refused the right even to information on abortion and contraception. It is also campaigning for state-funded education to become secular: new legislation in Britain makes it compulsory for schools to hold a daily act of collective *worship*, which has to be mainly Christian unless a dispensation is granted.

It makes no sense to pick on a piece of cloth if we only pick on one religion, or if we take on fundamentalism and leave the rest of religion alone. If Christendom is where we live, we have to take on that too. □

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Donations needed urgently for the 'Rabia Janjua must stay' campaign.

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Auctionary saga

Guðrún Jónsdóttir describes the historic 1975 Icelandic women's strike and how radical feminists fought and finally abandoned the battle to carry grassroots activism into mainstream politics.

Iceland was discovered by Nordic vikings in the 9th century and they started to settle here then. During the first 100 years of the settlement in Iceland, in the 10th and 11th century, women had equal rights to inherit land and property, but they could not do with it as they pleased. They were under the guardianship of their fathers, brothers or husbands. For example if a woman was raped, it was considered an offence against her guardian and male owner and the rapist had to pay him fines for the offence. Rape was seen as an offence against property which diminished the value of the woman as a future or present wife. Women of 'good' and powerful families were of course more valuable, so the fines were connected to the class position of the woman. At that time in history women could divorce their husbands if they could claim that the man could not or would not "attend to his sexual duties". The same was true for men.

The country was not populated when the vikings came here. In the 13th century the country lost its independence to the king of Norway and later to Denmark and we did not become independent again until 1944 when Iceland became a republic after a century long struggle for independence. During the time of Norwegian and then Danish rule women's financial position got worse and divorce was impossible. This has possibly left traces in women's self image today: in the old Icelandic Sagas, written in the 13th century but based in the 10th and 11th centuries, there are stories of strong-minded and independent women. These Sagas have been read by people through the ages, and they were for example part of what I read as a girl.

Our head of state is an elected president, without any political power. The political power rests with our parliament, consisting of 60 members elected every four years. At present we have a woman president and many foreigners see that as a sign of the powerful position of women in Iceland but, as will become evident in the following, this is not so. I am sorry to say that our woman president has not in any way shown her sympathies with women's lot in Iceland.

Between 80% and 90% of women in Iceland are engaged in waged work. The working week is long in Iceland, officially 40 hours but most people work overtime or hold more than one job at a time. Regular wages are low, the cost of living is high and it is generally acknowledged that you cannot support a family on one wage. Women's wages are even lower than men's; on the whole women earn about 60% of men's earnings. This is both because women do not work as much overtime as men (because of childcare duties) and because wages in the areas where women work – service, welfare and industry – are traditionally lower. Daycare facilities are bad; each woman must try to solve her daycare problems as best she can.

The women's strike

The women's strike on the 24th of October, 1975 is in my mind the most unforgettable single event in women's history in Iceland. It originated from women's preparations for the United Nations Women's Decade 1976-1985. Women across political parties formed informal working groups to prepare for the Women's Decade and in June 1976 they

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organised an open women's conference to discuss their preparations and to collect new ideas. A group of women proposed at the conference that on the 24th of October women would strike (the more conservative ones said "take the day off") to show the importance of their work. This idea had been discussed within the Red Stockings, the most radical women's organisation at that time. (The Red Stockings here were started by women who had been in Denmark to study and the organisation was formed in the same way as the Danish Red Stockings, with consciousness-raising groups for women who were new to the organisation, and groups around issues for the ones who were more advanced. These days as in the UK, the ideas mostly came from America - a mixture of radical and liberal feminism, with the liberal ideas dominating.)

The proposal for a national women's strike was accepted at the conference, a coordinating group was set up and contact made with all women's organisations around the country as well as with women within the trade union movement. The idea caught on and on the 24th it is estimated that around 90% of women went on strike; women who were in waged work and women who were working in their homes. In Reykjavik an outdoor meeting was organised, the biggest ever held in the country, with about 25,000 participants. Around the country women took part, either by coming to Reykjavik or by organising meetings where they lived. I do not think anybody can really explain why this was possible, how women across party-lines, age, class and all the other things that separate us could get together in such an action. Maybe the explanation lies in a growing feeling of dissatisfaction among women, especially because of our lower wages.

The meeting in Reykjavik was powerful. Women started to talk together about their situation in small groups after the meeting and the air filled with hope and optimism. Women's social contribution became evident as society came to a standstill for a day. The telephone services were not working; offices were closed or could not function properly as all the secretaries were on strike; men could not go to work as nobody was there to take care of the children, or, if they went to work, they had to take the children with them, and

most of them did not know how to take care of children; all the schools and the health services were closed or half-closed . . . it was really unbelievable. For many women it meant realising for the first time that their work mattered; undoubtedly it increased their self esteem and consciousness. But alas it only lasted for a day. The next day everything went back to 'normal' and, until 1981 when we started to prepare for the women's party, women's issues and feminist activity were very low. Our connections to the world were

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Women's Party members dress as beauty queens in protest at city mayor's sexism - City Council gallery, 1985.

limited at that time: we weren't aware that what we were doing had been used in any way. It was not until four years ago that I by chance came to know about the Wages for Housework group and that they had taken up our action and used it for their own purposes.

Local government

During the summer of 1981 a small group of women, who had been active in the Red Stocking movement – which by that time was dead because of inner political struggles (should it be based on Marxist, Trotskyist or other principles? should the slogan “women's struggle is class struggle” be adopted? by the time these were resolved this first second-wave feminist movement in the country was over) – started to meet informally. The idea of putting up a women's list for the coming local government elections in Reykjavik in the spring of 1982 came up, at first as a joke, but later for serious discussion. The group started to form an ideological base, redefining the ideology of the Red Stocking movement. The main difference was the emphasis on the importance of women's work both waged and home work. Women's culture became a key concept: that women and men were different because of their different sex-roles and that women's culture, formed by taking care of others, contained values that had been overlooked by men, values which should be the guiding social values of our society. Looking back it was a pro-women ideology, it did not really challenge male dominance. Trying to place it, it was a mixture of liberal feminist ideology and a plea for a re-evaluation of women's worth.

This group called a public meeting in the autumn to discuss the idea of a women's party. The meeting was a success and all present agreed to put a women's list forward. Women formed groups to discuss what issues we would put forward in the elections. None of us had taken active part in politics before and I think that about 100-200 women took active part in forming our electoral platform. All our leisure time went into this and the level of activity was high. We did not engage much in the ideological discussion; we all felt that if we went too deep into that, it was bound to split us right from the beginning. We focused on women's situation as we saw it; the double work burden for women, low

wages, bad day-care facilities, unfriendly surroundings for children and people, bad public transport, a housing policy where everybody was forced to buy their own house. We were determined to change all this!

We had no money for the election campaign so we had to use our imagination and invent a new way of getting our message across. We hired a tractor and a hay-wagon, formed a song group and drove around the city singing and making speeches. We went into workplaces, spoke to women there, answered questions, sold old books and clothes from street stalls. We wore small hats and dresses that were an imitation of the old Icelandic national costume for women. We distributed leaflets, tried to get interviews in the media, always careful to be at least two taking part at the same time. We decided in the beginning that we would try to work against building up hierarchical organisation, to share responsibilities. This succeeded well during the election campaign and when the votes were counted we got almost 12% of the votes and two representatives in the city council. And that was really a shock, because we were not quite ready for that!

During these months of intensive work, where everybody contributed with ideas and took initiative to things, a strong feeling of sisterhood had developed. Looking back this time was so giving and hilarious that landing in the middle of the male power structure after the election was like a cold shower. Suddenly we were two of us sitting in the city council, about 30 other women sitting on different committees, suddenly faced with having to take a stand on all the different matters coming up in local government. We felt alone and unwelcome.

Most of the men within the establishment leered and tried to use all the well known ways of breaking us: making fun of us; telling us we were ignorant, did not understand or misunderstood the issues; even our outward appearances were commented on, that we were too young or too old, ugly, too aggressive and so on. For many of us this was a frightening experience and some of us became silenced, our ideas and energies dried up. The work in the council was dreary, but had to be done anyway. Gradually fewer and fewer women came to our weekly open meetings to discuss our policy and after the first year al-

most all the work was done by five to ten women. That was the most difficult part to handle, and the question “what in heaven's name are you doing in here?” became more and more imposing. Looking back, the contradiction of the feminist ideas of sharing and organising in a non-hierarchical way on the one hand, and on the other of taking part in the working of the establishment, always fighting against and trying not to become incorporated, is obvious. It would have been more bearable if we had had the women active in the election preparations behind us, but when they disappeared, the whole enterprise lost its *raison d'être*. I and other women became discouraged and at the end of the four year election period we had had more than enough and we had a strong feeling that we were not helping feminist ideas in any way. On the contrary we carried with us the power invested in political persons; what we were doing was not much help for women generally. It did not affect their daily lives. We were on our own, making policy and taking stands in a way we thought would benefit women but without direct feedback from them. My feeling was that we had lost touch with the grass roots. Certainly we had increased our personal power, but we had not empowered women generally in any concrete way. That this is right can be seen by the fact that women's wages are now at an all time low, violence against women is on the increase, women's workload has not diminished, they are still locked in the stereotyped sexroles.

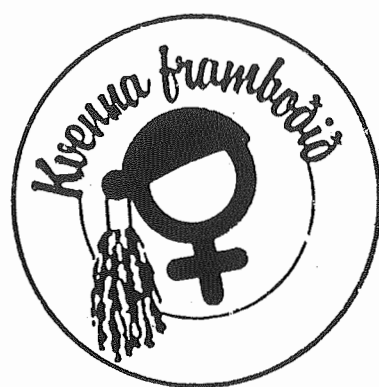
When it came to deciding if we would put forward a list again in the 1986 elections, I and the majority of the women still active decided not to put up a list again. We felt that we could work more effectively for feminist issues outside the establishment. At present most of us are scattered, some of us still struggling with feminist work, others have given that up for the time being. We meet occasionally, but the old feeling of solidarity is gone. In 1983 the original group of women in the women's list had been divided over whether we should put forward a women's list as well for the parliamentary election then coming up. A breakaway faction decided to put up a list and they got three representatives elected. This group decided to put up a list again for the local government elections in 1986. They got one representative elected,

one of the two representatives elected in 1982. I have not taken part in the work of the women's list since 1986 when I left it, but according to what I have heard all the work both within the parliament and the city council is carried forward by a small group of women which, seen from the outside, has become an establishment very much like the other political parties. The ideological base is still muddled, emphasis on the family as a valuable institution seems to be increasing. The feminist representatives both in the city council and parliament are now respectable politicians.

Rice pudding protest

During our first four years in the city council most of us looked at it as one form of action to make the situation of women visible. We did not see ourselves as a regular political party, always thinking about the next election and trying to walk the middle of the road so as not to offend anybody. Having a future place within the city council was not the aim. The aim as I saw it was to make feminist issues visible. We used different sorts of actions to do this. One was to go into a supermarket and buy the ingredients for a rice pudding. Our minister of state had commented on how cheap and wholesome rice pudding was for the workers, in order to justify the low wages. We used this in our action, but connected it to women's wages; we said we would not pay more than 60% of the cost, as that was the proportion of women's to men's wages. The shopowner called the police, the shop was closed, we started to sing and tell jokes but the police did not dare to intervene, and we left when the media arrived to cover the situation.

Another action took place within the city council itself. In the week before the meeting the city mayor had crowned the beauty queen of Iceland in a televised programme and had then commented that if all the representatives from the Women's party were as beautiful and sweet as the 13 girls who took part in the contest, he would not dare to put forward his party's list in the next elections. When the city council meeting started we, 13 of us, came all dressed up in gala clothes or bikinis. The two representatives took our place in the meeting hall but the other eleven went to the gallery. We had crowns made of silver paper and on the ribbons were inscribed characteristics such



as Miss Easy-to-Handle, Miss Quiet, Miss Sweet and so on. The media covered the meeting and at the beginning I explained what the action was about and said that we, the representatives, would behave during the meeting in the same way as the male representatives' stereotyped image of women demanded, by following their, the male, leadership and not have an expressed opinion of our own.

Such actions for me were a source of life; it gave me a sense of freedom and a feeling of being able to make the patriarchy look silly. This we managed I think because our actions were spontaneous and we loved to take parts in them.

Becoming a representative within the establishment cuts you off from direct contact with the grass roots movement. In a way it also made feminist work more difficult because the Women's party representatives give a picture of themselves as the representatives of the Icelandic feminist movement, but at the same time they are of course representatives of a political party that is asking for people's votes. Getting something done across party political lines is almost impossible now. These women's connection to the grass roots movement is now also minimal. We who are outside do not turn to them any more than to other political parties, when we have to put issues forward or ask for money. The same is true of the traditional women's organisations, which feminists outside the Women's party do not see as their representatives either. So in a way their existence has made it more difficult to get a participation across party lines workable around single issues. My feeling is that more and more feminists are realising that trying to change the system from the inside is not working well.

Campaigns against violence

In 1983 a shelter for battered women was opened in Reykjavik, the first of its kind in Iceland. It was a group of women who initiated the opening of the shelter. This group was broad, partly feminists and partly women from traditional women's organisations. It collected money to buy a house and sought money from official sources for its running. Soon it became clear that there was an ideological difference between women in the group behind the shelter and from 1984

onwards it was run along feminist ideas. From this group other groups have been established, such as a rape crisis group and an action group against incest, established in 1986. The groups have worked independently and on a voluntary basis.

On the 8th of March last year we got together and contacted different women's organisations and trade unions where women are in the majority, and proposed that we would together organise the 8th of March as a beginning of a campaign against violence against women and children. The day was a success, and at the main meeting it was decided that we who had been active in the voluntary groups should try to get money from the state to establish a counselling and information centre for women and children who had suffered sexual violence. This we did with the informal backing of the many women's organisations that took part in the 8th of March meeting - 18 in all.

We aim to open the centre to women and children who want to come and discuss their experiences, try to give them advice and support and organise self-help groups. We are also going to offer seminars for professionals and other people whose work is likely to bring them into contact with survivors of sexual violence, and to publish educational material about sexual violence for the public. In short, we aim to make it inescapably clear that sexual violence is a social problem that cannot be ascribed to individual pathology. In the beginning of this year we got money from the state, much less than we had asked for but enough to open our centre. From the beginning we who had been active in the action against incest saw it as an aim that the incest survivors themselves would take over the work involved, running incest survivors' groups, putting out information and organising campaigns. This we have been able to do, so when the counselling and information centre opened on the 8th of March this year, one of the paid members of the centre was an incest survivor. All the voluntary work groups are still active and they really form the backbone of the centre.

We define all sexual violence as stemming from male power, and we try to organise our work along the lines of feminist practice. Discussion about sexual violence was a total taboo in the country until the feminist groups opened up the discussion and our work

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has unmistakably shown that all forms of sexual violence are to be found in Iceland as in other countries.

In the icebox

Of course there are lesbians in Iceland, but they have not come out; it is too difficult because of the discrimination against homosexuality that reigns in the country. In 1978 an organisation by homosexuals was established by gay men. Lesbians have taken part in it as well, but they find it even more difficult than gay men to come out. At one time they (the lesbians) tried to get a room for themselves in the building where the Women's list had its centre, but this proved to be difficult as many women in the Women's list did not want them in the same house as it would scare voters from the party! Finally by manipulations some of us could get them accepted, but at no time has the Women's party taken up the issue officially.

The problems for lesbians has to do with financial independence to a certain degree, as for all women who depend on women's salaries alone. But it is even more difficult for lesbians as they are discriminated against on the labour market if they come out. On the last 1st of May demonstration, the lesbian and gay organisation leafleted and demanded equal rights for employment. They said in their leaflet that their members suffered discrimination, often found it difficult to get employment and were sacked if the management found out about their sexual preferences. Heterosexism is very strong in this country, and lesbianism, as well as being gay, is by most people still considered 'a perversion' or a 'pathological' state. Gay men

and lesbians have in the last few years begun to organise together again and have their own office and open evenings, counselling and various support groups. Of course the gay men are more visible and active, seen from the outside at least. Aids is a health problem here as in other countries, and the gay group has come out around that issue in a very responsible way. They have published pamphlets, opposed the official policy on Aids and so on, which is one reason why they are more visible. Besides the cult of the family and heterosexism that are the dominant ideology here, the smallness of the population surely plays a role in the discrimination against lesbians.

Looking to the future

I think we feminists in Iceland have up to now been quite isolated; we have kind of closed our eyes to the world around us. But there is a change; increasingly we are establishing ties with feminists in other countries, although still on an individual basis. The reason is possibly that feminists are fragmented here as in many other countries and so our future connections to the world will probably stay mainly through single feminist issues, such as sexual violence and feminist research.

What I would like to see happen here is that we build up a feminist movement, independent from the political parties, including the Women's party. We are so few that we sorely need the support we could get from each other. As it is, today we are scattered around different issues which is O.K. if we could at the same time meet as a movement that would take up issues and fight for them on a collective basis. □

Song group: Election campaign 1982



Abuse in the making

You cannot make pornography without the sexual abuse of women and children. Pornography and sexual violence are linked not only at the point of consumption but – more importantly – in the process of production, argues Liz Kelly. Here we print an edited version of her speech to the Scottish Women Against Pornography conference in March this year.

For many women and children the connections between pornography and sexual violence are simple and obvious – they have lived them. Their clear and passionate testimony, and more recently accounts from offenders themselves, about the harm involved in the production and use of pornography *should* have changed for ever the way it is discussed, thought about and analysed. Yet we are still told repeatedly that there is no evidence, even by women who call themselves feminist.

The fact that we are talking about big business, organised capitalism and organised crime tends to be overlooked. Yet, the profits of the US porn industry are bigger than those of the film and record industry combined. Unlike other areas of the 'entertainment' business porn seldom creates 'stars' who are able to command huge fees, nor are sex workers organised and thus able to set basic pay and conditions of work. The working conditions of sex workers are invariably far worse than those of other workers and the high profit margin stems in part from this 'super' exploitation.

The vast profits also tell us something about the massive growth in the sex industry in the last 10–20 years. The creation of new markets that characterises late 20th century

capitalism has resulted in health, lifestyle, the 'natural' world and sex becoming commodities. Unlike the drug industry, to which it is sometimes compared, porn has managed to create a form of legitimacy: it has become a staple in much of the popular press and commands its own cable TV channels; telephone 'sex' and 'chat' lines have increased dramatically in the last few years (224 different ones were advertised in one edition of a top shelf magazine). Consuming sexuality as a product of international, multi-million capitalism was not part of the radical vision of sexual liberation that emerged in the late '60s and early '70s, yet the sex industry is defended through references to liberating us from repression.

At the same time as sex is being marketed as a consumer good, western tourism to 'unspoilt' (ie colonised) areas of the world has also become a major business. The initial impulse was directly related to World Bank policies for combating Third World debt: debtor countries were told to develop their 'assets' and tourism was explicitly encouraged. Western tour operators were quick to see the new potential: tourism has become one of the largest growth areas in some Third World countries, although much of the income goes to western business.

The emergence and growth of sex tourism is one of the latest twists in western economic exploitation. Its other origins lie in the militarisation of South East Asia and changes in the sex industry itself. In the '50s and '60s South East Asian women were recruited into the sex industry to sexually service US troops fighting the Korean and Vietnam wars. Specific areas were developed for 'Rest and Recreation' – a euphemism for US soldiers having sexual access to women. Whilst the US 7th fleet is still based in the Philippines the scale of 'demand' has lessened. In the 1970s the development of tourism in South East Asia was linked to sexual access to women. In the early 1980s, for example, the Prime Minister of Thailand stated publicly that some Thais might find some aspects of the developing 'entertainment' industry offensive. Sex tourism gained popularity and legitimacy through the '80s, and many 'long haul' holiday brochures now explicitly refer to bar girls in their descriptions of Thailand. The most grotesque example appeared in the 1989 GoPlaces/Sun Med brochure which included the line "technically speaking they're all whores; in truth they're little girls showing you their knickers".

Resistance to sex tourism within Thailand has created a further adaption – the importation of South East Asian women into countries such as Japan and Germany to work as prostitutes and 'live pornography' shows. Many of the women are not aware that they are being recruited into the sex industry, but are already in debt when they arrive, and have often entered illegally. Japanese feminists have uncovered evidence of sales of women, the removal of their passports, women being imprisoned in rooms when they are not working, and women being repeatedly raped on stage by male customers on their first night at 'work'. Women from Thailand, the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam who believe they are going to work as hostesses or singers, find themselves in situations which Kathleen Barry named 'female sexual slavery'.¹

Sex tourism and 'live porn' shows reveal the extent to which the sex industry is involved in maintaining not only capitalism and women's oppression but also racism and western imperialism.

Before exploring the connections between pornography and sexual violence I have to say something about the current political context for women taking an anti-pornography position. We must address the paradox of some prominent right wing women supporting recent campaigns whilst some socialist and/or libertarian feminists are engaged in publicly challenging our work. It is vital that we develop both an analysis and forms of activism which challenge the assumptions of both groups. If we ignore this challenge, many women who want to be part of a mass resistance to the sexual exploitation of women and children will feel excluded – as the Blackwomen's and lesbian caucus at the CAP conference in Nottingham last November made clear. Both groups voiced their concerns about the implications of CAP: firstly, approaching Tory women MPs to support the 'Off the Shelf' campaign; and secondly, accepting and publicising the support of women like Jill Knight, whose anti-woman, racist and homophobic views are well-known.²

In a recent debate between anti-pornography feminists and Feminists Against Censorship (a recently formed group whose sole purpose appears to be to challenge those of us who campaign against pornography and to defend women – currently mainly lesbians, who want to produce 'sexually explicit material'), Linda Semple stated that if someone showed her research which proved the connections between pornography and sexual violence then she might change her position. She clearly has a different definition of feminism to mine: it has always been my understanding that as feminists we began from women's experience and through that challenged the ways in which men have constructed knowledge and made rules about what counts as 'evidence' and 'proof'. Our feminist critics seem to want us to go right back where we started from – mainstream 'scientific' proof.

We have to face head-on accusations that we are threatening freedom of speech and that we are anti-sex, denying women – and lesbians in particular (it seems to have escaped their notice that many of us – anti-pornography activists – are lesbians) – an active sexuality. Andrea Dworkin directly add-

resses both these charges in her interview in this issue of T&S.

We have to call the bluff involved in the use of emotive concepts like 'censorship' and 'free speech' which sidestep the fundamental questions: who is free to speak? whose speech is censored or protected? are there no circumstances in which speech should be restricted?

Even some members of FAC acknowledge that those of us who are committed to radical change have to support certain restrictions in speech/publication.³ Most radical journals/newspapers have policies about not publishing offensive language. Workplace policies on sexual and racial harassment are also limitations on what is acceptable speech. These policies begin from a recognition that writing or speaking are acts which can infringe or threaten the rights of others – particularly their right to speak and their right to safety. If we start by acknowledging areas where there is some agreement about restrictions on speech we may be able to begin a more complex discussion about what restrictions are acceptable, why, and who should have powers of enforcement.

SEXISM KILLS



In relation to the Right, we must make central the way pornography trades in all forms of inequality and our commitment to eradicating all forms of power relations. Pornography objectifies women and celebrates coercive heterosexuality. It is women and children who have the least choices, who are exploited by, and in, the sex industry internationally. Pornography sexualises racism – both in the deliberate exclusion of Black women from top shelf magazines reflecting racist constructions of 'attractiveness' and the representation of Black women as exotic, animalistic or more deserving of brutality in less accessible material. Mass produced porn constructs lesbianism for the male gaze (and increasingly through phone lines for the male ear), fetishises disability and denies the historical meaning of fascism. Integrating all of these issues in our analysis, exposing the pro-family, pro-heterosexuality not so hidden agenda of the Right, is the only way to ensure that they cannot hi-jack our opposition to pornography and use it for their own ends.

Pornography and sexual violence

Feminist campaigns against pornography and all forms of sexual violence have enabled women and children to stop keeping men's secrets. Women's and children's accounts are the evidence we use to indict pornography. The dictionary definition of evidence includes "testimony, facts in support of a conclusion". This is what we mean when we say there is evidence – not so-called 'scientific' proof from experiments conducted in laboratories. We do not need to provide more 'proof', but in the battle of ideas we need to be clear about what we know and what it means.

I no longer talk of pornography causing sexual violence: men cause sexual violence. This distinction may seem pedantic, but it has important implications. A simplistic 'cause and effect' model leads to requests for 'scientific' proof, and opens the way to sex offenders claiming diminished responsibility because of their 'addiction' to pornography.

There is, however, a crucial way in which pornography is sexual violence: much of it involves/requires the abuse of women or children for its existence. Some men's use of pornography is connected, in a variety of ways, to the process through which they choose to attack women and/or children, and may

influence the form the assault takes.

We have to shift the terms of the debate from focusing on what the pictures/images mean and how they affect us to who the women and children in the pictures are and how they got there.

Production

The production of pornography often involves the abuse and violation of the women and children who are objectified within it. The vast majority of women who work in the industry are economically disadvantaged. It is no accident that many of the most vile films and videos, some of which record the actual murder of women (the Obscene Publications Squad have recently seized videos which record the murder of children) – euphemistically called 'snuff movies' – were made in poor, often but not exclusively Black, countries. The advertising for the first of these videos boasted "the film that could only be made in South America, where life is cheap". Some lives in over developed countries are also cheap. There is some evidence emerging that a syndicate is operating in Europe which targets young single women travelling alone and films their violation and murder.

Much commercial child pornography is produced in poor, again often Black countries. Alternatively children may be procured from starving and desperate parents and imported to over-developed countries for use in production. Runaways or street children in over developed nations are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Use in pornography is just one of the ways in which vulnerable children are sexually exploited throughout the world. Gitta Sereny in her study of child prostitution in three of the richest countries in the world says: "Almost every child I spoke to had at some time been asked to pose for pornographic pictures or to take part in porno-movies."⁴

The obvious fact that each piece of child pornography involves the sexual exploitation of a minor, that it is a form of child sexual abuse, was lost on legislators and law enforcers in many western countries until women campaigners pointed it out loudly in the late 1970s.

Pornography and Sexual Violence: Evidence of the Links, published by Everywoman, gives us access to the testimony of

women in the hearings of the US pornography ordinance (see T&S 7). Increasingly, inspired by the courage of Linda Marciano who, in *Ordeal*,⁵ revealed the way her manager, husband and pimp Chuck Traynor terrorised her during the filming of 'Deep Throat' – for much of the time off camera there was a gun at her head – more women sex workers are telling of the brutal and coercive ways in which their participation was enforced.

We are also learning that, rather than pay actresses, some pornographers are deceiving, or kidnapping, women and children and then filming their violation. Valerie Harper's testimony to the ordinance hearings includes an account of a New York ring:

that enticed young models to an office supposedly for a job interview. Once there the young women were attacked, subdued by beating or drugs and then photographed in hideous pornographic poses . . . When they came to or were released it was with the warning that if they contacted the police all of the polaroid shots of them would be sent to their parents, places of business, schools. (p.95)

This syndicate had made millions of dollars from recording actual rapes before one woman was brave enough to report her assault to the police.

We also have the testimony of women and children who are coerced in the production of home-produced porn. We often forget this other strand of production – but from three separate sources recently I have been told that 40% of the throughput of 'Truprint', the largest mail-film processor in Britain, are porn photos and that much of this involves children.⁶ Many top shelf magazines advertise their own 'confidential' photoprocessing service. Producing child pornography is an offence, yet here again we see that profit is more important than women's and children's lives. Whilst home-produced porn is not 'big business' it is often sold. Many of the large child sex rings and rings involved in ritual abuse photograph and/or film their abuse of children and swap or sell copies to others.

A proportion of pornography is itself a record, *evidence*, of the actual violation of women and children involved in its production. Reporters investigating child pornography for a recent edition of the German magazine *Stern*, recognised this fact and handed their evidence over to the police, as

did the BBC *Newsnight* team when they ran a feature on child pornography earlier this year.

Consumption

We are increasingly hearing evidence from sex offenders themselves about the connections between pornography and sexual violence. It is bitterly ironic that Ted Bundy, a multiple sex murderer, chose to appear in a video a few hours before he went to the electric chair to tell us how dangerous pornography is and the ways it influenced his behaviour. On the one hand we are told there is no proof, yet on the other defence lawyers are beginning to use 'addiction' to pornography as mitigation in court – an implicit recognition that it is no coincidence that many convicted sex offenders own large collections of porn.

A case widely reported in the press in November 1989, which resulted in questions in the House of Commons, is only one of a growing number in which particular assaults are recreations of scenarios depicted in pornography. An infamous case from the US, in which an Asian woman was bound and hung upside down from a tree, was a direct reconstruction of the front cover of an edition of *Hustler*. Pornographers are not averse to reversing the process – transforming brutal assaults into mass market 'entertainment'. A cover of *Penthouse* was a direct reference to the New Bedford rape case (on which the film *The Accused* is loosely based) which was being tried at the time.

Many pimps use porn as a way of schooling young women into their new trade and there are magazines which run stories like "The Joy of Rape: How to, Why to, Where to", with explicit instructions on how to get away with it; contact magazines for paedophiles which advise how to entrap children.

We also have mounting evidence of the way in which pornography is used to coerce women into forms of sex they would rather not take part in. The *Everywoman* book, women's letters to Clare Short and CAP, a recent survey in *Cosmopolitan* contain numerous examples.⁷ Ten per cent of the 933 women in Diana Russell's US study said that they had "been upset by someone trying to get them to do what they had seen in pornography".⁸ Several of the women I interviewed for *Surviving Sexual Violence*

⁹ told how their husbands used fantasies from pornography to terrorise them. Whilst having sex the men would talk about how exciting it would be to watch them being raped. Each of these women lived in fear of the fantasy being made real. A woman I talked to recently told how she had submitted to acting out scenarios from porn thinking this would protect her daughters, only to discover that her husband had made her daughters do the things she refused to do.

Many adult and child survivors of sexual abuse have told us how abusers used pornography to convince them that what they were asking them to do was normal. Ray Wyre, who works with sex offenders at the recently founded private clinic 'Gracewell', has collected similar accounts from men. This example was included in evidence given to a parliamentary select committee: "I had a vast pile in my bedroom of pornographic literature, and this was used in my seduction methods". This man realised that he could make money from his abuse, and began encouraging the girls he abused to mimic the porn whilst he photographed and filmed them – completing a circular connection: porn was used to facilitate abuse, and abuse facilitated the production of more porn.

Pornography is used as a form of sexual harassment in the workplace, particularly where women are attempting to break into non-traditional areas of employment. Displays of pornography are deliberately used to intimidate and humiliate women and to mark out 'men only' space. Using porn as a way of invading women-only space also occurs. What faith can women have in the new police approaches to dealing with sexual assault when women police officers tell us that the walls of special interview rooms have been covered in porn?

These are just some of the everyday ways in which the experience of countless women and children connects pornography and sexual violence.

Mass circulation

The central theme of much pornography that women and children enjoy coercive sex feeds the dominant mythology about sexual violence, a mythology which functions to blame the victims and excuse men.

Pornographers and their defenders tell us that there is a difference between fantasy and reality; that one seldom influences the other. But occasionally men who produce material for porn mags fail to toe the party line.

Hustler printed an interview with Charles Bukowski who wrote a story they published called 'The Fiend' – an account of the rape of an eight year old girl. The interviewer asks if the story might make someone commit rape: "I think so yeah", Bukowski replies. Anxious to defend the party line the interviewer states that *Hustler* doesn't agree and asks how he can justify writing the story if this is what he believes. "I had to write the story – what happens in the wake of the story – there you go." He states that 93% of what he writes is true, 7% improved on, insisting that girls invite sexual advances and that it does them no harm.

Charles Bukowski has a lot in common with the US judge who when giving probation to a 28 year old man convicted of raping a five year old girl, said that he was "satisfied we (are dealing with) an unusually sexually permissive young lady" and that the rapist had been "powerless to refuse her advances"; with Lord Lane who described a paediatrician's procuring and sale of child pornography as

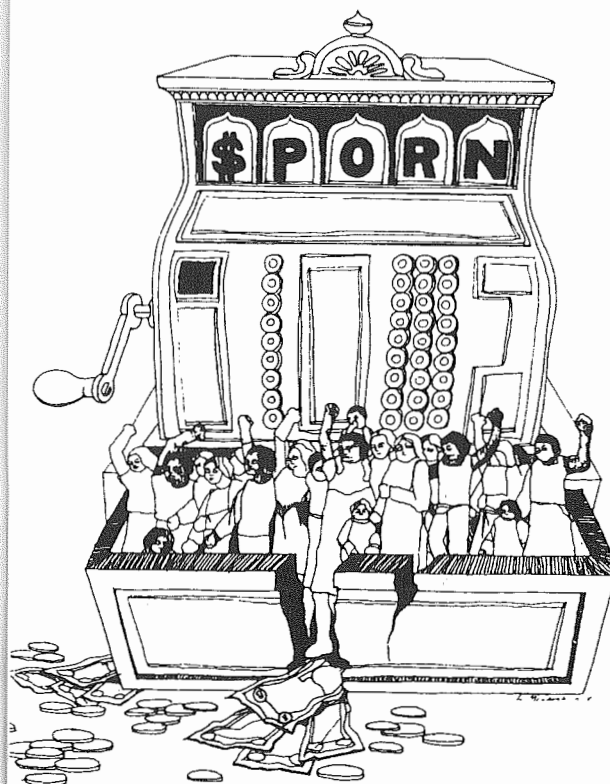
similar to a schoolboy collecting cigarette cards; and the judge last year who stated that the collection of over 900 pictures of a man's children was not a serious offence since they were for his own consumption and no worse than what appears in the media.

A recent court case – called by the press "the New York Preppie Murder case" – illustrates the way in which men are able to redefine rape and assault as sex, and the ways in which the law and the media collude with this. Robert Chambers pleaded not guilty to murder, arguing that his brutal assault and strangulation of Jennifer Levin was the unfortunate and unintended outcome of consensual 'rough sex': sex which involved 'playing' at rape and murder. In his eyes Jennifer consented to risking, and indeed losing, her life. Sections of the US media, and in the UK *Tatler* magazine, made a folk hero out of Chambers. He – not Jennifer – became the victim; his name not hers will be remembered.

Pornography encourages and supports sexual violence by redefining assault as sex; injury as normal behaviour and pleasurable. In pornography sex is not a form of intimate human communication but a weapon for degradation, humiliation and punishment. The acceptability of porn and its central message reinforces and reasserts the myths about rape and sexual assault which feminists have campaigned to expose.

Albeit for different reasons and from different perspectives, pornographers, right wing moralists and sexual liberals all have interests in maintaining a view of sex as illicit, dirty and obscene. It underpins notions of sex as 'naughty', 'dangerous', 'rebellious' which are either viewed with horror and in need of regulation and control, or embraced as forms of resistance to be encouraged and celebrated. Unlike feminists, they either ignore or downplay the extent of sexual violence and the ways in which western capitalist economics creates the conditions for increasing trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children from the Third World.

Neither pornographers nor the Right have an interest in what is required if we are to get rid of both pornography and sexual violence – challenging male power and other systems of oppression. □



1. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979, Prentice Hall).
2. For a more detailed report see Jill Radford in *Rights Of Women Bulletin*, Spring 1990.
3. See Elizabeth Wilson, *Fundamentalist Feminism* (New Statesman and Society, 23 June 1989).
4. Gitta Sereny, *The Invisible Children: Children 'on the game' in America, West Germany and Great Britain*, (1986, Pan Books).
5. Linda Lovelace (Marciano) and Mike McGrady, *Ordeal* (1980, Citadel Press).
6. Jo Spence in an invited lecture to the Open University, Changing Experience of Women, Summer School 1989, and two friends of ex-Truprint workers.
7. *Pornography and Sexual Violence: Evidence of the Links* (1988, Everywoman); Catherine Itzin and Corinne Sweet,
8. Diana Russell, *Sexual Exploitation* (1984, Sage).
9. Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988, Polity Press).

was it good for you?

Was the '60s sexual revolution a complete con for women?

Has sexual liberation become sexual liberalism?

Frankie Green reviews Sheila Jeffreys' new book 'Anticlimax'.



Catherine Tidman

This would be a difficult book to review comprehensively for several reasons: its ambitiously broad chronological scope; its tackling of several major issues at the heart of longstanding debate, each of which deserve more volumes of their own, and – for me personally – my own very mixed reactions to it. I swung between nodding in agreement, reading with interest and fuming with annoyance, not simply from one chapter to the next but often between alternate sentences. So, this piece is a discussion of some of my responses.

I read *Anticlimax* from a position of basic agreement with one of its major arguments: that the ideas and practices of liberalism, libertarianism and the so-called sexual revol-

ution do not bring, are in fact opposed to, the liberation of women, since they fail to radically challenge and transform the power structures of oppression. Like Sheila Jeffreys I believe that heterosexuality, as it is constructed under patriarchy, operates as a fundamental part of women's oppression – though I find it more useful to see it as doing so in conjunction with other systems, not as a primary cause. Despite this fundamental agreement and sharing her concern over some aspects of the sexual politics of the '80s, and the belief that it is necessary to argue with them, I find myself parting company with much of the book.

There is some interesting historical analysis presented to back up the book's

arguments on these issues, but I can't help feeling that this may be obscured by other features: the less convincing theory and the question of style. Of which, more later.

The 1950s

The book begins with an analysis of the construction of sexual ideologies in post-war Britain and the USA, through examination of the literature of sexologists, therapists and organisations such as the Marriage Guidance Council and the Family Planning Association, which reveal to us "the naked power politics of marriage and sex". The '50s provide many horrific examples of the ways in which women's sexuality has been defined by and subordinated to men. An angering picture is presented of the psychological pressure placed on women and the psychiatric and surgical means employed to tailor their desires and bodies – literally – to male dominated sexual intercourse within rigid definitions of femininity. This process is placed in the context of post-World War Two fear of women's independence, when a backlash reinforced men's power and against the perspective of heteroreality, as Janice Raymond terms it, which defines women as existing only in relation to men. Women failing to fit these terms are pathologised, punished and, as ever, blamed for the breakdown of family and morality. The increased eroticising of the housewife, the relegation of the spinster to limbo and the stigmatising of the lesbian, are major features of the post-war landscape of sexual politics which are mapped here. I 'enjoyed', if that's the word, this chapter, it was one of the sections I wished had been expanded, particularly in its exploration of the connections between compulsory heterosexuality, gender, family, state, class divisions and racial supremacy in the context of the McCarthy era, which are touched upon in relation to the ideas of the eugenicists. The picture certainly fits with what I remember of growing up in that era, the lives of my mother, aunts and other female relatives (in working and middle-class white English society) and its bleak legacy which women had to contend with. I found myself wanting to know more about how this ideology actually affected women's lives, to what extent it was lived out or resisted, and how this varied amongst different groups of women.

I don't want to fall into the trap of unfairly criticising one book for not being another, for not being something it doesn't purport to be. If we want to know more of what women did and felt during certain times we can talk to each other, or read and write other books. Nevertheless I think there is a problem here, which is that when studying a history of ideas, through documents representing ideology to us, we're only dealing with one dimension of that time. When sexologists, politicians, writers and other patriarchal ideologues are lined up we have a formidable array of misogynist belief and action, and it would be hard to overestimate the destructive effects of these on women. Feminist theory often has a difficult path to tread between awareness of the enormity of oppression on the one hand and women's resistance on the other, lest we be accused of over-concentrating on victimisation or of celebrating unreal freedom. The point I want to make here is that of course ideology isn't simply lived out by people it's imposed on; it's resisted, negotiated despite imbalances of power, in processes of struggle. It is also not only not passively received, but is always mediated by material circumstances and historical location, by our ethnicity and/or class positions and our physical beings, as well as by what we are able to choose to do with these givens. *Anticlimax* starts off by dealing with sexuality in such an historical context, but, disappointingly, seems to lose this perspective. My unease increased with the book's treatment of the '60s.

The 1960s

There is bound to be a tension between the process of selection historical analysis requires and the drawbacks of taking one strand out of context. Ideally I think the best theory traces for us how that single thread is interwoven with all the rest. Personally, looking back at the '60s I find it makes little sense to isolate the realm of sexuality from everything else that was going on – especially as this was a time when for many of us the link between the personal and everything else began to be made clear. Sheila Jeffreys doesn't go into a lot of detail about what went on in the '60s; rather, she discusses features of the sexual revolution, as expressed in publications.

Ideas of the sex radicals became "the conventional wisdom of a generation of young

people who were living out the revolution now through their sexual practice" supplying "theoretical underpinnings" to "free love, non-monogamy, communal living". A part of this was the eroticising of single women who were "conscripted into compulsory heterosexuality". From this perspective, that era (when all the revolutionaries were men, apparently) seems to have merely offered women "a new and insidious form of oppression".



Catherine Tidnam

Although I must admit to sometimes feeling defensive about the '60s, since they are attacked with monotonous regularity by the right for being the source of all it defines as the ills of subsequent decades, as it erodes the few rights that were gained then, I wouldn't wish to romanticise them. But there does seem to be a blurring in *Anticlimax* between books and ideas in circulation at the time and what happened in actual women's lives. As a member of that generation I can't help resenting the implication that we were more

or less dupes of ideologies against our own interests. In my own experience, lots of women questioned and rejected these ideas, albeit after or even because of painful experience. We do have some agency after all, however limited it may be; we are not only victims, we fight back and produce our own ideas. The '60s were a time when many women opened up the possibilities of doing just that, when we began to make changes and, however flawed those struggles may look in retrospect, developed the basis of belief in our rights to control our own sexuality and lives. It was partly – as Sheila Jeffreys notes – dissatisfaction with the limitations of what went on then that led to the creating of the Women's Liberation Movement: both the positive and the awful aspects of the '60s, enabled many of us to become feminists. A necessary stage or a new form of oppression? Both? Whichever, the point I want to make is that women were actively involved, not simply imposed upon in a context of intense political activity on all levels, influenced by major international changes. We weren't only reading Reich and *The Joy of Sex* – and when we did we didn't do so uncritically.

Not puritans, not liberals

The section of *Anticlimax* which deals with pornography and a liberal backlash against feminism makes refreshing reading in today's climate. I feel there is a need to articulate feminist analyses and clearly restate how they differ from both puritanical and liberal perspectives, and am glad to read other women working from this basis. One of the great benefits of feminism has been the development of the possibility of going beyond the limited liberal arguments of 'repression' versus 'sexual liberation'. Much liberal argument about sexuality rests on this opposition. Particularly in the area of representation, in illuminating the workings of misogyny and power imbalances in literature, feminism provides a 'third way' of looking at culture above and beyond the simplistic counterposing of censorship to freedom of speech. Feminists also dismantled the notion of the 'hydraulic' sexual drive which sees sexuality as a natural force within us which society represses. The idea that we must lose our inhibitions and express this essence is a part of liberal ideology, and has frequently

been a damaging one for women, as Sheila Jeffreys describes. Current debates on pornography have sometimes lost awareness of such perspectives; the return of conventional ways of thinking is a disappointing and retrogressive aspect of debate in the late '80s.

I would recommend this part of the book as a contribution to the dialogue around these issues, as I am amongst those who are fed up with finding radical feminism and anti-pornography campaigners falsely characterised as puritanical and censorious. I rather enjoyed the likening of some libertarian socialists' focusing on those '80s buzzwords "desire" and "pleasure", in debates on sexuality, to dealing with the issue of housing by talking about interior decoration at the expense of looking at homelessness. However, although the liberalisation of women's liberation continues to be a serious issue, it is surely an overstatement to claim that in the 1980s it "has been hijacked by the sexual libertarians" who are bent on persuading us that sadomasochism equals liberation. Which movement? Just because some women in England and North America have come to believe that sadomasochism, acting butch and femme or producing lesbian 'erotica' have worthwhile political significance does not mean that the entire movement has been taken over. It may have been depressingly tedious – and disturbingly reminiscent of the '60s, yes – to see some women going into naughty schoolchild mode and behaving as though waving vibrators about and claiming the 'sexual outlaw' badge of identity politics constituted something radical. But if these activities are disheartening we only have to look elsewhere to find women's movements globally engaged in struggles against all the forms of oppression which women have to contend with.

Creating the sexual future

As the introduction states, a lot of *Anticlimax* "is devoted to showing the extent to which the eroticising of power difference dominates male gay culture and sexual behaviour", and argues against lesbians and gay men working together politically. This is an issue which has been written about by other women quite extensively. Here it is presented from a perspective which concentrates mainly on gay male sexual practice, which contains features

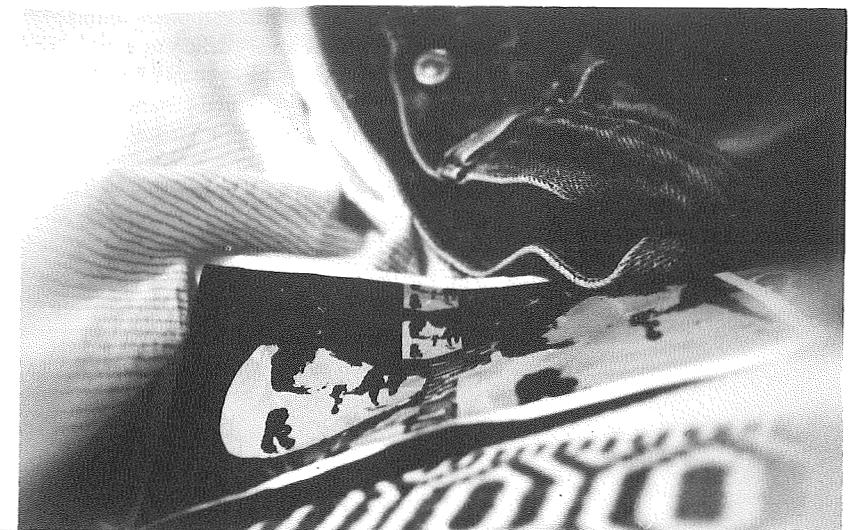
which, according to the definition presented here, are actually heterosexual:

heterosexual desire is . . . sexual desire that eroticises power differences. It originates in the power relationships between the sexes and normally takes the form of eroticising the subordination of women . . .

Heterosexual desire can exist also in same sex relationships, because women and men do not escape the heterosexual construction of their desire simply by loving their own sex.

Feminists have undertaken radical projects in examining language, shifting the meanings of words so that what is signified by, for example, "women", or "lesbian" is opened up for redefinition. Adrienne Rich's notion of a continuum, by shifting the meaning of "lesbian", threatens the entire false division of women into lesbian or heterosexual upon which the term rests, and offers us new ways of evaluating relationships between women. However, I don't find the unfixing of meaning suggested here very helpful. Undoubtedly there are ways in which lesbians and gay men may reproduce heterosexual behaviour. But if homosexuals are really being heterosexual – and heterosexuals can attain homosexual desire, i.e. eroticised equality – as *Anticlimax* suggests they might when heterosexuality is no longer an institution – don't the terms start losing, rather than gaining meaning? Since they are inventions of the sexologists anyway, I would rather work towards a society in which they could eventually be relegated to the dustbin of history as the fictions they really are, rather than play semantic games with them. Also, we cannot define out of existence (i.e. reclassify as heterosexual) lesbians whose sexual desires we do not approve of.

Catherine Tidnam



I found most difficulty with the concluding section of *Anticlimax*, "Creating the Sexual Future", with its identification of "heterosexuality as the root of all other oppressions that exist under male supremacy". It is tempting to analyse complicated situations in terms of monocausal explanations. I wouldn't claim to have always managed to avoid this myself, despite the fact that it was the very possibility of open-ended explorations of patriarchy, sexuality, gender, life, the world and the universe which drew me away from economic determinist socialism and towards radical feminism in the first place. Surely we should be wary of the logic of such statements as: "once the eroticising of otherness and power difference is learned, then in a same sex relationship . . . otherness can be reintroduced through differences of age, race, class . . . sadomasochism or roleplaying". The eroticising of racial inequality within a sexual relationship surely proceeds from racism as much as heterosexuality; we cannot just subsume racial oppression under heterosexism. How does that help our understanding of the interrelationship between racism, gender and heterosexuality?

Telling us what to do

I must confess here to an antipathy to a writing style which, even if I agree with some of what's being said, reminds me of Trotskyist pamphlets and calls to action. This usually involves a great many 'musts', 'shoulds', 'cannots' and 'only thens', a liberal sprinkling of either/or choices and a doctrinaire or hectoring tone. I have had this negative reaction to the writings of revolutionary feminism since the notable example of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group's paper, *Political Lesbianism*, in 1979. Some of the responses to this exemplified for me a very different approach to sexual politics: complex, respectful of other women, non-prescriptive and grounded in awareness that oppression is a material matter not simply changeable through choice – and that women will make different choices even when those conditions change. I still believe this is possible to achieve without slipping onto the terrain of liberalism where tolerance reigns at the expense of radical perspectives. Women were angered by the prescriptive attitude as well as the content of this paper, as

Sheila Jeffreys notes here (having herself been one of its authors), during her discussion of it and other theory about heterosexuality, such as Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality*. Authoritarian modes are resisted by women, for good reason. And, ironically, they are often counter-productive, producing by way of reaction the very behaviour they set out to criticise. I was disappointed, then, to find a similar tone used again here. Critics of the paper objected to both its tone and content, which cannot be separated. This issue of how we address one another is surely not a minor one? Form can't be divorced from content; to use an old '60s cliché, the medium itself is a message.

Assertions like "lesbianism is a crucial strategy for women to undertake if they wish to end their subordination" and "lesbian separatists are . . . showing that a world beyond heterosexuality is possible" seem to lose touch with the awareness of the material conditions of the real world which informs other parts of the book and are very reminiscent of the *Political Lesbianism* paper. I am surprised that such vanguardist statements are being made again in 1990. I was disappointed by this discussion in *Anticlimax*, particularly by the dismissal of criticism of the paper. When the shit hit the fan over this, the responses were cogently argued and passionately felt. Lesbian and heterosexual women argued that telling feminists in a bullying manner that they should give up sex with men if they were serious about their politics was superficial, insulting, meaningless, patronising, unrealistic and not in fact at all radical; as one woman said, the implication that women are stupid and brainwashed and oppressed because of their own feeble-mindedness is itself "a classic liberal sexist argument". It is grossly inaccurate to characterise these objections as liberal resistance to radical critiques of heterosexuality, or as a failure of courage. It seems incomprehensible that these criticisms haven't been taken on board – the author still seems to feel that the "basic arguments behind political lesbianism . . . were unimpeachable".

As Rich points out, focusing on the question of whether to condemn all heterosexual relationships misses the real issue: "that of the absence of real choice, without which women can only depend on individual luck", which continues to mean that we all "have no

collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in our lives". *Compulsory Heterosexuality* challenged feminists to denaturalise heterosexuality and analyse how, as an institution which functions as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic and emotional access to women, it interacts with other systems. Places in *Anticlimax* which take this view sit uncomfortably alongside ahistorical demands for the destruction of heterosexual desire. Whilst it is important to argue against liberal perspectives which present sexuality as an area of individual preference and emphasise equality within existing structures, I don't think the problem is helped by the kind of approach taken here. There's a need to talk about why libertarianism fails women, and some of that is in this book. But I suspect women will react to much of the book in the same way they did to *Political Lesbianism*, because of the attitudes expressed and the way the audience is addressed. Surely women change because of a combination of our desire to do so and the availability of enabling material conditions in areas such as housing, law, money, work, collective action and such like – not because we are told we ought to, or because we are exhorted to behave correctly. Valuable and challenging ideas are likely to be lost if they are embedded in writing of this kind.

Making equality erotic

We're promised by the cover the writer's "own vision of the eroticising of equality as a way forward", although what we get is the suggestion that "we" should open up the avenue of "sexual desire and practice that does not leave us feeling betrayed . . . which eroticises mutuality and equality" while "shutting down those responses and practices which are not about sexual pleasure but the eroticising of our subordination". Apart from the lack of clarity as to what "we should" actually do, I am unclear as to who this "we" is; which audience is being addressed? It's probably true that most women would love to be able to engage in sexual practices in which men do not enjoy exploitation of power through sexuality, which "eroticise equality" – and many struggle to do so, often against great odds – but most of the women of the world don't have an equality to be eroticised.



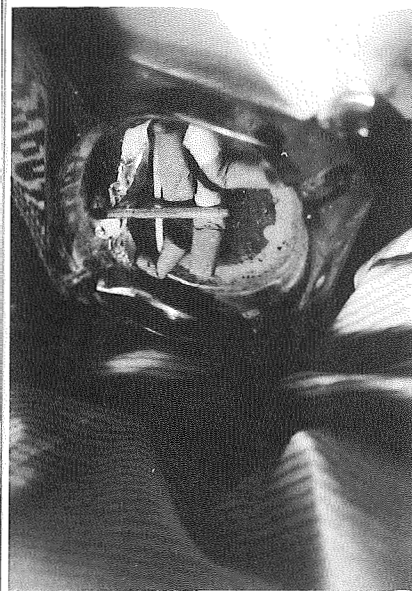
Catherine Tidnam

(Which is not to say that those of us who have a greater degree of control over our sexual lives should not strive for equal relationships, of course.) Presumably Sheila Jeffreys is aware of all this, but then if her theories are not intended as generally applicable this needs to be made clear. Otherwise "we" may be left fulminating against theory which ignores women's real life situations and struggles. "Creating the sexual future" doesn't mean much, surely, if it doesn't involve all of us and is not seen as a part of a complex process of struggle from which it can't be separated out. *Anticlimax* doesn't explicitly deny this, but is undermined by the narrowing of focus and loss of historical perspective towards the end, which creates a disturbing gap.

I think many women look hopefully for feminist writing, theoretical and fictional, which will somehow do justice to the complexity and contradictions of our lives; I know I do. Political theorising that illuminates these contradictions and does not iron them out, that manages to blend personal details with the larger, institutional patterns of power and make sense of both without denying either, has provided women with impetus and challenge, support and imaginative wisdom over the last couple of decades of feminist organising. I think we need more of it now: theory both complex and caring enough to meet our realities. Anything less is an anticlimax, indeed. □

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Catherine Tidnam

Writing Our Own History

Talking personal Talking political

Agnes Quashie talks with Gail Lewis, Melba Wilson and Olive Gallimore of the Brixton Black Women's Group about its activities, strengths and weaknesses, the contradictions of funding and the complex relationship Black women had and have to the women's liberation movement.

Agnes Quashie: Shall we begin with a history of how the group got started?

Gail Lewis: Basically it was a mixed group that started in 1974; women from *Race Today* and women from Sabarr bookshop who were working in mixed organisations and trying to form a women's study group. The aim was to get a space for themselves to look at the questions of colonialism and the nature of capitalist society, African history and these sorts of things. The object then, was probably to locate themselves as women but not particularly as feminists.

The context of Brixton at the time is important because it was when there was a very big local surge of political activity in a number of fields. There was, for example, a very active South London Women's Charter group that was a predominantly white women's organisation but very much focused around questions of working class women's relationship to work/employment. Some of the early Brixton Black Women's Group (BWG) women felt that was a women's organisation that they could have at least

some sympathy with because it seemed to be related to questions of class whereas much of the Women's Liberation Movement was organising in consciousness raising (CR) groups and was deemed to be not really to do with them – certainly not to do with working class women as it was thought to be a 'petit bourgeois' diversion, if you like.

Something else that women were involved in at that time was the whole move in Brixton and other parts of the country on the question of housing and the demand for empty houses to be given over to local people to be renovated. At that time a squatters' movement was developing and one of our sisters who is dead now, a woman called Olive Morris, was involved in that and in setting up the study group. This was important, that we saw ourselves as an organic part of local community-based political struggle. She was also involved in trying to set up Sabarr which was the Black book shop, because that was a time when we, as Black people, were particularly vocal, both in Britain and in the US, in expressing the need for the learning and

writing of our own history, literature being central, particularly resistance literature.

This also related to the whole question about imperialism politics, where literature was seen as a part of the resistance struggle; you know, the decolonisation of the mind and all that. Olive in fact got the Sabarr book shop, the original one we had at the end of Railton Road, by going out as a part of the collective and claiming the building. In fact, when the council was going to evict them she went up onto the roof and said "I won't come down until you let us have the building". So what I'm saying is that the history of the group started as a study group, out of two locally based Black organisations, but saw itself very much as part of a community based organisation, campaigning on a number of issues.

AQ: How and why did each of you become involved?

Melba Wilson: I came to this country in 1977 from California where I was involved with consciousness raising type women's groups and I had done a lot of things in terms of Black politics and community politics. However when I came here I was looking for more of a consciousness raising group. Also I was looking to get connected to the Black community. I am married to a white British person and so I was cut off from the Black community, so in that sense the group was a sort of mainstay, a grounding.

CR was one of my main thrusts in the group and I kept on pushing that; that the personal is the political. But ultimately the group became for me a political education because, even though I had done a lot of work in the States, it was in the narrowly defined strictures of Black politics and basically it was all aimed at getting a piece of the pie, the American pie. BWG broadened my whole perspective in making me more aware of what Black people outside of the States were doing, and what Black people were doing outside of Britain, and in a sense it opened my eyes to the world.

Olive Gallimore: What was talked about little then was that women came out of different educational experiences or abilities or political understandings of their situations but there was the need to move beyond that. I was brought up in West London, I was a 'single parent' living in Vauxhall. I got to know other

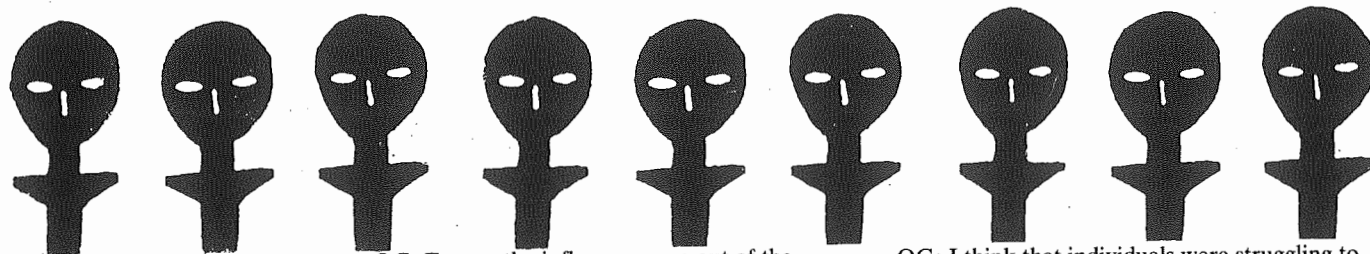
women, single women, women who were less articulate than the other women who were in BWG and I suppose in that sense I was part of this group of women who came in, but I wasn't intimidated by that because there was some purpose behind it in sharing and moving beyond our current situation. Lots of things were happening at a community level and people were organising around education quite specifically. What was missing at that time was a clear political or feminist analysis of what was taking place and to find a way of using that to absorb as many women as there were. I think later on that created conflicts and it was quite an important political lesson for everyone involved.

GL: BWG was not the first women's organisation that I had been involved in. As a teenager I had been involved in things like the Soledad Brothers Support Campaign here, and briefly in something called the Black Liberation Front when it first split off from the Black Panthers. I developed what I considered to be a Black consciousness, I had always thought of myself as some kind of a socialist as well, and during that period, before the late '60s, I met one of the women who had been involved in setting up the study group and was introduced to a number of Black political events really, rather than a whole active network. Then I went away for a while because prior to that I had thought that feminism had nothing to do with Black women and working class women of any 'race'. Then I started to read a few things and thought that maybe there is something in this and then got involved in 1975 in the National Abortion Campaign, as the lone Black woman, in the area where I was living.

I wanted a Black women's group but was terrified because by this time I had also come out as a lesbian. I heard about a group that met every Sunday and I thought about it for a long time and then thought no, I can't possibly go to a Black women's group because I'm a dyke, and then one day I just took courage and went.

I joined the group because I felt not only did I want to be involved in a Black women's group, but I wanted to be in a Black women's group that defined itself as socialist and anti-imperialist. There had to be some form of continuity for me in terms of my previous political development.

This interview with Olive Gallimore, Gail Lewis and Melba Wilson is a discussion about their individual reflections/perceptions by the Brixton Black Women's Group and is not to be taken as the final word of the collective as a whole.

Illustrations adapted from *Speak Out*

OG: For me the influence came out of the Black Panther, Angela Davis era; you know, the 'most wanted woman in the United States' and that kind of thing, and because as a single parent I had been working on those issues and like Gail wanted to belong, I got involved. What I wasn't clear about at that time was feminism, so to speak, it wasn't something close to me.

AQ: *How were you run, was it collectively? Did you have funding?*

GL: At that time we would have rejected funding. Our demand was that there are empty houses; we have a right to them as Black folks; we're going to take them.

The study group used to meet in people's houses and by the time we joined in 1978 we used to meet in Sabarr bookshop, in the room at the back. Clearly that was not satisfactory but it was a necessary step, because when we eventually came to discuss whether we should set up a centre there were many long and important discussions about whether an organisation like ours – one that was supposed to be revolutionary, supposed to be about change and centrally supposed to be critical of the state in the way in which it controls all Black people and working class people – how could we take money from the state?

AQ: *What did the organisation consider were its aims and objectives? Did it have a particular kind of politics; any particular labels by which to identify the people who were involved?*

GL: We were a collective, but at the same time we had, like all other collectives, different individual women there. We had different forms of knowledge, we came from different kinds of political histories and political understandings, but there wasn't one leadership position. On the contrary actually, that manifested itself more in organisations such as the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) than in BWG or in any of the local Black women's organisations that we developed links with.

OG: I think that individuals were struggling to identify themselves and the community also saw us in a particular way. It was not until later that we sat down and decided who we were and wrote a position paper. It was not an overnight thing that you suddenly had one uniform concept of who we were. There was a lot of individuality within BWG. This is why the identity of the group involved at times a very deep and painful debating, to get those different focuses on the agenda.

MW: I suppose we were all already political women which is what made us come to BWG in the first place. We were all a certain type of Black woman and while we saw ourselves as being very much a part of our community, that did present problems in terms of Black community politics, male/female Black community politics. However, in terms of the workings of the group the coming together around a political basis was what provided the impetus and is what I think got us over a lot of those contradictions – even though we may not have dealt sufficiently with them at the time. For instance, the heterosexual/lesbian divide which is still hanging up the Black women's movement to this very day, as I am sure you are aware.

At the same time I do think that we did try and deal with these issues, but it was after some prodding. When Gail got up in a meeting and came out to us it precipitated a whole load of discussion, heartache and soul-searching, which was good in terms of the group having to face its own weaknesses.

GL: The group, for most of the years that I was involved, was a heterosexual women's group. I can remember saying to myself, "I have to tell these women that I am a lesbian". I was living with a white woman at the time and I felt this enormous split in my life, in terms of living as a lesbian and with a white woman then, yet being involved in anti-racist and Black women's liberation politics. But I did not necessarily want to go into a discussion about it because I felt alone. I knew

that some other women in the group were lesbians and for one woman in particular it was hidden from the rest of the women in the group for a long time. Granted, there may have been some discussion about lesbianism and what it meant, but in the late '70s/early '80s lesbianism was not seen as a political issue; it was seen as something you did privately and was therefore your own business. We really managed to hang ourselves up with that because like every other Black organisation at that time, we had a notion of the Black community as traditional, as homogenous and as unable to deal with difference.

After we got the Black women's centre in 1979/80, a Black lesbian group was formed. I was not a member of that, but they asked at some point if they could meet at our centre, and there was one hell of a furor amongst women from BWG, saying things like, "We can't possibly have lesbians meeting in our centre, what would the community say? – they'll know", and all this kind of stuff. By that time though there were enough other women, and not only the lesbian women in BWG but heterosexual women as well, who were saying, "This is crap, are they not our sisters?" So the lesbian group met in the centre but if you talked to any of the women who were involved in that, they never felt as if the centre could be claimed as their own; they always felt hostility.

There are also other questions about other identities and political positions. Some women may not have said that they were socialists as individuals but the group always said it was socialist.

MW: It wasn't only the lesbian issue that was not adequately dealt with. For instance, I am in an inter-racial relationship and I had great angst about wanting to come out in that way and not feeling that I could. In the end I did pluck up courage and said it and one of my enduring memories is just how many other women in the group were in inter-racial relationships also and we just did not know it.

We were all afraid to come out in that way, which is why my thrust was always the personal becoming the political, because there was that sense that we could not talk about stuff that happened outside in our other lives. It was like having a split personality, but in a way I felt a bit of a fraud, being in an inter-racial relationship, coming to a Black women's group and not being able to discuss that whole other aspect of myself. This is why I pushed for the consciousness raising aspect of the group. Not to the exclusion of the active political campaigning work that we also did and which was the main thrust of the group, but I also thought that other strand was important. So we had these two strands working within the group for very much of its active period. However, I do believe that we began to deal with it in as straightforward a way as we could at the time, given our frame of reference. You have to remember that we were seen as an anachronism within the Black community; we were taking time away from the valuable Black struggle, talking about women's politics, women's rights and so on, and that was seen as a white women's issue diverting our energies away from the Black struggle. There were all these things going on at the same time, which we were just trying to work through on a daily basis.

GL: I was probably one of the most vocal women in the group and I can remember saying, "I don't want a CR group". I mean there was an Irish war going on, there was Palestine, there was Southern Africa, there was class struggle in Britain and we had a wealth of information and something to offer. So I wanted to foreground all that stuff.

MW: I don't think it got in the way of our work. It was left hanging, but it was left hanging while we got on with the business of fighting the SUS laws and fighting the virginity testing at Heathrow Airport and doing a lot of really good work. I mean, we did have an agenda, and in those Sunday meetings when we met from three o'clock until six/seven, the



things that were on those agendas were about the SUS laws, about how we could organise as a community to stop young Black boys being stopped and hassled by the police. We organised around health, fighting against Depo Provera injections and all that kind of stuff.

OG: There was also the issue of whether or not the group ought to accept partnership money (funding). As I remember it, the discussion was quite fierce and went on for weeks. In the end it was agreed that we would, but Olive (Morris) also insisted that she be statemented as saying she did not want to be a part of this, based on a political analysis of the state getting involved in the lives of Black people and buying them off.

GL: The cost was that we lost individuals. Women would come for a short period of time and then feel that the set-up wasn't for them. This was usually for different reasons. Sometimes they would say, "I am not a socialist"; some of them were more separatist; for some it was not a feminist enough type of group. But I think the key thing here is that it was contradictory. It was contradictory in the sense that I was the only out lesbian for quite a while, but I was also one of the people who was arguing against talking personal, that this was a political organisation and not necessarily a friendship organisation.

AQ: How did you see BWG's relationship to predominantly white feminist organisations; about the idea of women being in sisterhood, Black as well as white women? Did you have close links with other women's groups that had a predominantly white involvement? Lastly, what do you think about white women who are involved in politics and struggles pertaining to Black women? How do you see these things fusing together, or don't they?

GL: Let's start with the 'easiest' one about what other women's organisations we were connected to. We were connected to many, and we also worked alongside many, and we were actively involved in other Black women's groups that started. We were very much involved in setting up OWAAD. We were connected to other women's organisations fighting around anti-imperialism: to SWAPO Women, Zanu Women and with women from Ethiopia, Eritrea; with Black American women's organisations, with Irish women's organisations. To some extent we were also

involved with women organising around Palestine and anti-Zionism. We also mixed with many other organisations, like the Depo Provera campaign for example. We also had links with, but a different type of relationship with, other white women's organisations that did not have a specific anti-imperialist focus, like reproductive rights. It was a much more tense relationship with such organisations but we weren't necessarily fighting against each other.

What is problematic is, because there is scanty documentation about our work and aims, both Black and white women have picked up a very wrong picture of the politics of Brixton Black Women's Group; saying things like we were completely against free and safe abortion on demand on the NHS, for example. We always supported the demand for a woman's right to free and safe abortion, but we also said that abortion was not the sole issue. I mean from our own experiences, from what we knew to be happening to Black women in this country and from a kind of picture of the world.

MW: With regard to the second part of your question, I think BWG set itself up to be an autonomous Black organisation and I think that was partly because some BWG members had been involved with white women's organisations/movement, and had come away feeling very disillusioned by the racism that they found within them; as well as the refusal generally to accept that there were issues that concerned Black women, or that Black women were involved with, that meant that we operated within a mixed (female/male) context within our communities and that we did not see ourselves as separate from our communities in their entirety. We consciously organised as a Black women's organisation because we wanted to address those things. I suppose that it was a reaction to the racism in the white women's movement as well, and it was also a reaction to the sexism of Black men, so in that sense we were a consciously Black and female organisation.

GL: I don't think that we had a principle by which we responded to white women feminist organisations or white women socialists or whatever. What guided us, despite the fact that some women felt extremely suspicious of white women's organisations, even when they were organisations like Women Against Imperialism for example, was saying that we

come from a position of Black socialist feminism; our central concerns are the anti-racist/the Black Liberation struggle, the anti-imperialist struggle and the struggle against capitalism. Therefore we decided that we would work with, we would make alliances with people as and when we could see that they were also fighting for those things. We acknowledged that alliances are not a matter of principle, alliances have to be strategic.

AQ: Was it difficult to negotiate all those different identities, i.e. at one and the same time being a Black women's organisation, a community-based organisation and negotiating that with wider women's issues – as you say making alliances – and also at the same time acknowledging the racism that can come from those alliances and dealing with them? Was it difficult to negotiate all those things and come out with something that you felt was positive?

OG: It was a minefield. Rather than use the white women's group terms 'in sisterhood with' we would say 'in solidarity with'. This is because we were still working out the racism or at least forcing them to look at that. Again in terms of this concept of 'in sisterhood', although I did not have any formal contact with white women's groups, I think very warmly of individual white women who contributed very significantly to my understanding of what was going on. At the time I did not see how valuable it was to me. However, now I can see that it has been extremely important in shaping and giving me hope.

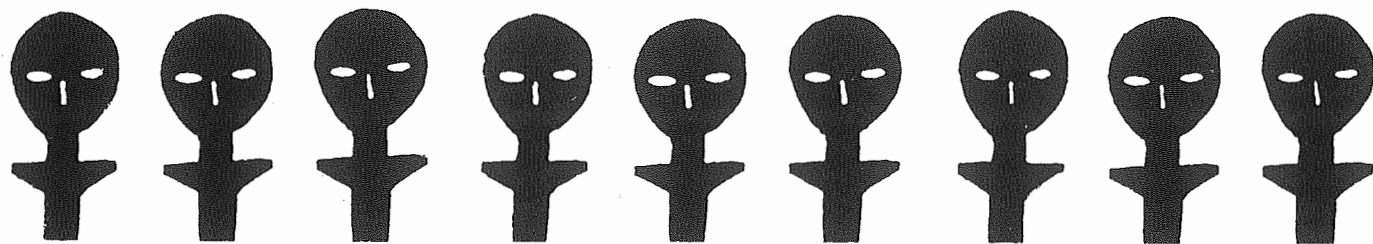
GL: But I think the way we negotiated it, and negotiated is exactly the right word, was because of the way we operated. We would have our Sunday meetings and then we would go off to do things that we had been collectively delegated to do. The strength of that is that you could always argue with other organisations that you were representing BWG. BWG grew in terms of how much respect it had; it was recognised in terms of socialist feminist networks at the activist level. There was a great deal of strength in that because you knew if there was a problem you could always go back to the group to get some feedback and work out how to proceed.

In many ways the most fraught sorts of negotiations that we had to deal with were with the men involved in the Brixton Defence Campaign. After the 1981 uprising – we had close links with the organisations in Toxteth

by now – the women from BWG and the women and men from the Brixton Defence Campaign joined and went to Liverpool. We still had to make it known that we had something to say; that we were not just the providers of space – they used to meet in our centre – and the people who did the typing. We still had to fight to be heard. I remember there was a big row on the coach on the way back from Liverpool, between the women and the men and that created quite a big rift between us. Some of the sharpest contradictions that arose, arose in relation to Black men, rather than in relation to white women.

OG: Although it did not affect me directly in my confrontation with some of those men, I know that some very strong sisters were physically quite shaken by that experience. Where there were differences between the women in those different groups, we could argue quite forcefully about them, but there still remained a great deal of respect amongst us. However that sort of respect was missing in our disagreements with the men and they





were often quite dismissive of us in very derogatory terms and they did not want to look at why they were behaving in those particular ways.

AQ: I am conscious of what I am going to ask next, because at times I get slightly wary of the motives behind questions that are constantly asked about the relationships between Black women and Black men. However, having made my qualification, why do you think your relationships with white women were less problematic than with Black men?

OG: Black men, those so-called political men, saw Black feminism as divisive, in the sense that it was splitting the movement and those of us who had a long and continuing relationship with Black men weren't communicating with them on that political level. With white women that is the basis on which a lot of relationships have been formed. But the immediate problems between the Black man and the Black woman were not analysed in that way; communication was about personal things – the way you treat me, the personal not being the political – and I don't think that the Black men had grasped that. Also they themselves were struggling through nationalist politics and had become quite entrenched in their own sexism and domination of women. It was only a privileged few of those men who were able to come out and look at all these things in a political context, but even they did not really want to spend a great deal of time looking at those issues we were raising because it struck at the very foundation of their own existence. They would have to undo a lot of things to get it right, but they were not prepared to do that.

GL: We were working with them, we were part of the Brixton Defence Campaign, we were meeting on our territory and some of those guys felt extremely threatened. I mean we did have political time for some of them, but others were just jokers; separatist, chauvinist people that we did not have much

in common with politically, over and above Black nationalist politics. Even those that we did have political time for felt threatened. I remember we had this Hindi poster with a woman holding a machete type thing and some of those guys would come into the meetings saying that they really couldn't handle the poster. They would say things like, "I don't know how to be with you any more, just talking to you individually". I can also remember being asked, "Do you think that Black feminism is becoming so strong now that all Black women are going to become lesbians?" There was also some disagreement as to how these tensions could be rationalised. Some of the men and a few of the women would say it was all about personal relationships and others of us argued that it was about politics.

OG: These problems show where we were at that time and I think we have made tremendous strides since then, with still a long way to go and we are very hopeful because I don't think that we are in a position to cut off any form of voice because we are all oppressed in one way or another. However, being oppressed does not mean at the same time you cannot oppress others. That was always another issue: was it possible for us to oppress each other within the group? As you can imagine some of us said "yes" and others said "no", but I do think that at times we did intimidate one another.

MW: Not intentionally.

OG: I believe that we can turn oppression on each other: I can oppress you at one time, and you can oppress me on another. Whether it is intentional or not, the effects linger on.

AQ: So do you think the conflicts that came out of all that were productive, even though it was a hard and painful struggle?

OG: In the main.

GL: I agree, but with costs, because we lost some good women. I mean there was so much

going on, there was friendships breaking down.

OG: It was too much to handle.

AQ: How did the group change, in terms of its earlier days, to that point at which the group as a collective 'dissolved' itself?

GL: We began to document our history. By then we had come to some agreement that documentation was quite important. Before, we would just write position papers which we discussed, because this was a way to encompass the division of interest amongst us, a way to share information. If you look in the earlier newsletters, nothing was given an individual person's name, besides the poetry and contributions that came from other organisations. Later it became the case that you could write individual pieces in *Speak Out* for example.

Another move that we made was to become very definitely and very statedly socialist feminists, actually saying we were a socialist feminist organisation.

OG: We also started moving towards taking up lesbian feminist struggles, for example. But going back to what Gail said about the organisation losing many good women, we have to acknowledge that some of those women left because they did not agree with the direction in which they thought the group was going. Some of those that left wanted to become engaged purely in practice and they thought that BWG was becoming an elitist organisation by, say, sitting down and writing 'position papers' on these areas.

MW: There was also some recognition of the personal as well, towards the end. And in fact when we finally closed BWG, one of the things that came out of it was a group called "Sisters in Study". This group not only dealt with study but with our personal interaction with each other and this was now an equal part of our agenda.

GL: We also moved from the earlier days where we were about creating a space in which women could meet together, for whatever purposes, to being a Black women's organisation which foregrounded gender relations as being the object of political change.

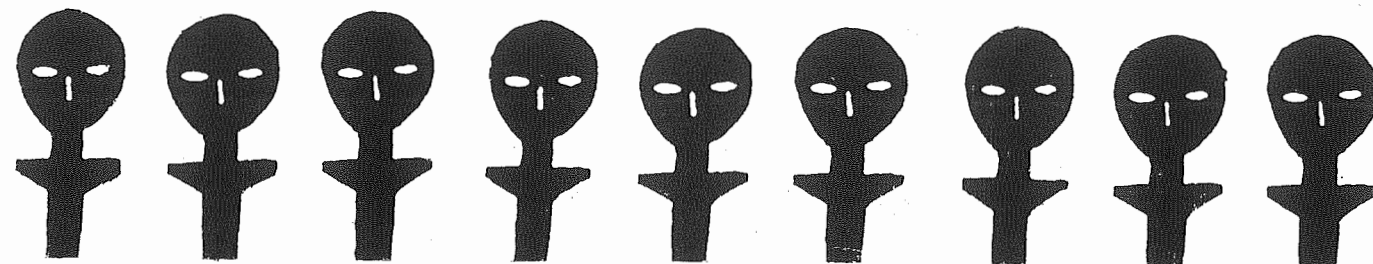
OG: Even the day and time that we met was an empowering factor in our lives. I mean, we met on Sunday afternoons between two and whenever, and that was generally a time of day when people stayed at home.

MW: In fact that was quite liberating for many of us, because to get that space was not easy for some BWG women; you know to leave the cooking and all the rest of it.

GL: I suppose the puzzle is, with all that going for it, why did it end?

MW: Many of the issues changed, for a start. Many of the issues that we were involved with – Depo Provera, SUS, disruptive units – in a sense had been won. At the same time, while we were looking for a new focus, younger women were coming into BWG. I think we began to feel a bit like old fogeys and some of us who had been involved in that ten year period of high activity felt as if we had given as much as we could at that point and that perhaps it was time to make room for the younger women coming along with new ideas.

GL: But they couldn't hold the group together either. I think to a certain extent we had won some of the battles but there still remained other issues. For example, policing as an issue is still there. I think a split appeared in the group between women who had been involved in the organisation for a long time and who had come to formulate a 'shared' perspective, and between women coming from outside who did not share that perspective and many of whom would not define themselves as socialist. There were some who did not see the campaigning issues as being the same ones as we would have.



OG: Also some people were just physically exhausted.

MW: We were just tired. I mean it is hard to get across the level of intensity during that period. It required a lot from all of us, in addition to the rest of our lives – you know, working and living and families and children and that kind of thing.

OG: There was also the effect of losing certain sisters at that stage in the group; the death of Olive, the death of Sylvia and others was quite a devastating experience as well.

GL: The other thing that happened was the grants strategy; you know, we became a bloody management committee with workers – we became employers. We stopped doing the things that we used to do, like standing on street corners selling papers – or more usually giving them away. We weren't knocking on doors any more. All we had to do by then was to give out a few leaflets through the council premises. At first we didn't; at first we would go out and encourage women, but we weren't doing that any more; instead we just put it



through the internal Lambeth mailing. We had become bloody managers, and this is what happens so often. You know, to get funding you have to meet certain criteria; to meet those criteria you have to adopt certain structures and to a great extent the structures dictate the relationships.

OG: Also, those who hold the purse strings know that we have certain unmet needs and goals and it's like a carrot dangling. I think the obvious thing is that we had not thought it all through, you know; what it meant to acquire those things through those means.

MW: I think we did think them through, but we thought that we could overcome them.

OG: And we might have done, could have done, if we had tried even harder still.

GL: Maybe, if we were still the same group, but obviously we weren't any more. You see the membership changed and was fluid by this time. Also, things might have worked out if we were centred around a particular project like Southall Black Sisters, who organise around the whole question of women and violence and everything that stems from that. We were more amorphous. We were also victim of not only the internal dynamics of BWG but also the fracturing of Black political activity; the fracturing, if not the demise of women's liberation political activity and the general political environment.

OG: With all its imperfections, if we were to do it again I would still be a member of BWG. But, you know, I take the African saying that there are no mistakes in life but only lessons to be learnt, and I know that my life has certainly been enriched by that experience.

GL: Oh yes, I totally agree.

MW: Definitely, and in that sense it has not finished, because all those people who went through BWG in those early years remain committed to its principles, to its ideals, and conduct their lives in that way. Of course we carry it through in different ways: for example I am a freelance journalist, so whatever I do, whatever I am involved in is informed by those years. Olive is an educational social worker and acts accordingly in the work that she does. Gail lectures in trade unionism at a polytechnic and her work is also informed by her years in BWG. So in that sense BWG lives. □



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discovering new vistas, so does Sinister
Wisdom, while keeping a strong identity
... in a repressive time." — Adrienne Rich

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