Lesbians in soaps
Queer theorrrhea
Saying no to assertiveness
MacKinnon interview
Femininity control in sport
Brazilian feminism
Trouble & 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 by Lisa Adkins, Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Marian Foley, Stevi Jackson, Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon: with help from Kate Cook, Caroline Forbes and Jane Taubman.

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The National Council for Research on Women is a coalition of 75 centres that support and conduct feminist research, policy analysis, and educational programs serving as a working alliance to bridge traditional distinctions among scholarship, policy, and action.

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Contents No. 29/30

Trouble & Strife

Letters.......................................................................... 2

Just Say No: The Empire of Assertiveness  Debbie Cameron
takes issue with assertiveness training .......................... 8
Unfair play  Sex testing of women in sport
by Mariah Burton-Nelson.............................................. 14
The Black Women's Movement in Brazil  Alzira Rufino ................. 21
Development, Ecology and Feminism  Sue Lamb reviews
two recent books.......................................................... 23
It All Comes Out in the Wash: Lesbians in Soaps 'Nicki Haste ........... 31
Queer Theory (and what it all might mean for feminists)
Catherine Grant............................................................ 37
Stuck in the Middle Liz Kelly on the need for feminist praxis .......... 44
One Hell of a Trip Louise Armstrong................................. 49
Exchanging Feminist Words Catharine MacKinnon talks
with Joan Scanlon.......................................................... 56
Statement by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin
regarding Canadian Customs and Legal Approaches to
Pornography................................................................. 64
Feminine Charms and Outrageous Arms Fen Coles looks at
women bodybuilders....................................................... 66
From Sexual Politics to Body Politics Susanne Kappeler ............... 73
Banned for Blasphemy: The Rape of Sita
Lindsey Collen discusses her novel with
Joan Scanlon and Tess Rumble....................................... 80
Dear TRS,

Radical feminism in the 1990s: Whatever next?

I have called myself a radical feminist since I first heard the term, when I was a student in the mid-1970s. I woke up on new year’s day 1994 and realised that, for the first time since, I’m not in any active women’s group, radical feminist or otherwise.

I don’t know what happened to radical feminism generally, but I got rather lost in the 1980s. At the time I put it down to a couple of things in my experience. It was mostly due to increasing frustration about how women’s groups worked, or often didn’t work, particularly in the era of local government funding. Remembering Space Rib, I recall the utter usefulness of adrenaline at our apparent inability in 1984 and 1985 to stop it going bad, to keep any sort of reasoned dialogue in the magazine, and how that was just the first (but for me personally, the worst) of those power struggles in London that rarely had happy endings. There was never a golden age where all groups worked smoothly, but it was terrible to see those who had succeeded and survived from the 1970s and early 1980s fall apart, bitterly, in the mid-1980s. I didn’t know then what to do about internal group organisation and dynamics, whether women used privilege or used identity as more oppressed-they as their weapons. (Do we know now?)

The second problem for me, though, was uneasiness about other radical feminists. I don’t really like about a third of the books recommended in ‘Going on Endlessly’ in Issue 27, and actively misunderstand some of their authors. I actually enjoyed far more a couple of the books that are attacked elsewhere in the issues for taking attacks on radical feminists.

The major part of my feminism in the last eight years has been trying to address issues by writing articles, newsletters, leaflets from an informed but personal position. Basing my attitudes on issues on how they feel to me, while still trying to make sure my ideas were historically accurate, backed up with facts and reasonable, committed, curing arguments. I could make a good case for this, I expect, but it still leaves me short of the practises of most feminists who write. I’m suspicious of rhetoric (while the most successful radical feminist writers have been brilliant at rhetoric) or the overly theoretical (and so resisting the major threats in non-radical feminist thought) or the worthy academic study (where women — some more feminist than others, of course — work on an idea for several years solidly). I’ve been not very interested in women’s studies all along, preferring the more journalistic approach, trying to write about issues in a ‘light but powerful’ way that all kinds of women would find interesting to read, and of course moving from one issue to another all the time; the idea of leaflets, newsletters, newspapers that I picked up from radical feminism in 1975 and don’t seem to have moved on from. How do we build a newsletter culture, especially when we don’t have newsletters any more?

Part of my radical feminism has always been a profound mistrust of academic study of women. The history itself had to be live, connected to us and activism, based therefore on our own memories; scrupulously checked for dates, of course, and certainly not rewritten to excuse ourselves. No used to put down women who weren’t there, but to help us all. To build up our understanding of our politics as a process.

So what is our history? Radical feminists I first knew weren’t campaigners, in the belonging on an-going campaign way: apart from newsletters, we ran women’s centres, were keen on conferences, organised women-only marches or discos or one-off actions. All the women on the women’s centres had quite distinctive views on consciousness raising that didn’t always work out in practice: we were anti-theory and the whole idea of individual solutions, and saw CR as contributing the major part of our theory, which didn’t exclude reading all sorts of things, including books by men, but wasn’t very respectful of what we read (even when it was by radical feminists). I did my bit to keep this going, organising a one-day conference on CR in about 1981, and setting up a free classified ad column in Space Rib for anyone who wanted to start a CR group (the article based on the conference was the single biggest seller Space Rib ever had, by a good margin), but even then I knew, really, it wasn’t enough, or not enough for me. I wasn’t in a CR group myself.

But I didn’t let go of the idea of personal experience either, the sense that you have to keep checking that your political words match your feelings and the things you see around you. Otherwise: what keeps you from losing reality altogether? What stops you from going very wrong?

It was this insistence on starting from what we actually feel, as opposed to what we’d like to feel as good revolutionaries, that meant I would never make a revolutionary feminist. From where I sit, as a friend of Sheila Jeffrey’s, the revolutionary feminists were much more smug against than shining. But the differences came to me when we tried to put together a joint radical/revolutionary feminist show, when we discussed doing an article on a feminist week. What did we do in all those groups, at those meetings most nights? The revolutionary feminists present argued for a wonderful description of what we ought to be doing, the perfectly right-on activism. The two of us radical feminists then thought how interesting this would be to write instead about why we actually did what we did, what really had made us decide to go to some meetings and not others, and why sometimes we stayed at home instead. The rest were not impressed.

The revolutionary feminists were the ‘voluntarists’, that classy word much bandied around at that time, who had an apparent clarity and purity of vision, a wonderful lack of scepticism, and some pretty charismatic speakers. I knew even then that my sort of radical feminism was probably not going to reach as many women. However: radical feminism in the 1980s found its own speakers and visionaries. The enthusiasm for theory — and the call for ‘no compromise’ and no truck with feminists who disagree — is clear even in Y&S. There is space to talk about our doubts, and our concern that sometimes feminists are not very sophisticated about what it takes to bring about change: but that space is mostly in our friendship networks, precious and rare, between old-style feminists, who certainly won’t give up thinking, but often keep their heads down in public.

After quite a few years of feminist activism, when I half heartedly applied for a job with the GLC, I couldn’t cite any big campaign I’d ever worked with: everything except my feminist ‘journalism’ was smaller scale, like organising a women and signing group, or working in a feminist anti-nuclear group, or getting involved with the local primary school (or living in group houses, or getting involved with other women’s children, which I didn’t mention was part of my politics). Everything was at a very personal level, really, apart from those leaflets and newsletters and magazines. (And I didn’t get the job.) I don’t think I was wrong, exactly, in my radical feminism — women’s centres, conferences and articles can change women’s lives — but in the late 1980s I wasn’t even writing in British publications. And after that: a women’s group I set up at college to encourage women to talk about their experiences drove me wild with boredom. In 1992 I could no longer take the dynamics of the funded collective I’d worked in since 1984 — why on earth couldn’t we achieve more with the money? — and then I couldn’t face propping up a newsletter any longer, that I’d worked on for the best part of eight years. I am group-less, and I don’t believe you can be an activist on your own.

My problem is that I believe entirely in radical feminism, but not, perhaps, my own any more.

Ruth Walligrove

Postscript, April 1994: Three times in the last six weeks I have read or heard someone say that they feel the women’s liberation movement is reviving, that women feel enthusiasm for action and optimism that we can achieve things that is more like the 1970s than the 1980s. On a personal level, I’ve met up with a group — sounds like a romance, doesn’t it? — in Manchester who share ideas about what we can do, and we’re planning action, including organizing a one day workshop and talking to other women’s groups about ideas for joint projects. It’s probably in this light that I’m reading issues 28 and feeling more cheerful.
Dear Trouble & Stife,

On my first day back in London for a visit from Australia at the beginning of June I was browsing in a bookshop when I came upon the Spring 84 issue of Lesbian Review. It was a letter to Sheila Jeffreys's book Lesbian Heresy as well as an interview with her. As I leafed through I saw that the reviewer, Rachel Wingfield, referred to the small section in Sheila Jeffreys' book which makes criticisms of me through an interview, 'Mapping Lesbians, AIDS and Sexuality', which I did with Cindy Patton five years ago and published in Feminist Review (No.34, Spring 1990). Rachel Wingfield goes on in her review to attribute, to me, with no supporting quotes, a position on SM and survivors of sexual abuse which misrepresents me. 

Liberal criticisms

This is depressing stuff. I have been critical of Sheila Jeffreys' political perspective and activities for a long time. There is no reason why she or anyone who agrees with her should care about me personally or abstain from criticizing my work. What I do find more and more reprehensible is how easily those who disagree with Sheila Jeffreys' position are misrepresented and accorded of liberalism — god no, a threat to her life itself, or her career, or their previous feminist positions to one extent or another.

The Feminist Review interview referred to in Lesbian Heresy deals primarily with issues around HIV/AIDS. Within that context Cindy Patton and I said things about child sexual abuse, which while not mentioning the reality of terrorism, posed some difficult questions. In the interview one of the things I say which has never been quoted is this: 'I don't want to let abusers off the hook or suggest all over again that children lie, or wipe away the fact that millions of people, mainly girls, have been and continue to be sexually abused, mainly by men.'

Before FMS

Yes, we then went on to suggest some 'here-fical' possibilities about the re-calling of abuse by adults and the way in which memory can sometimes be reconstructed by adults. We did question the usefulness of an undifferentiated definition of child sexual abuse and a rigid understanding of the inevitable negative effects on all children of a whole range of sexual abuse. We did bring up the feminist insight that families mess people up — do away with sexual abuse and simply damage people would still be produced. (Let me add here that at the time of the interview neither of us had read anything about the trauma of sexual abuse nor were we in any way addressing the issue of people who claim they were falsely accused of child sexual abuse.) In her review, Rachel Wingfield makes her own misrepresentation of my politics. Talking about the undermining of 'a radical feminist analysis of male violence and sexuality' she says: 'However, as Jeffreys describes, whilst those lesbians are minimizing the reality of sexual violence, many of those lesbians involved in writing lesbian pornography, working in strip clubs, and getting involved in SM tell us that they are survivors of sexual abuse or rape. Hence O'Sullivan has also been known to put forward the reverse argument — that SM "helps" women who are survivors of sexual abuse to "work through" the effects of their abuse.' Where do the hell does this come from?

Cindy Patton states that in some American lesbian and gay communities the issue of child sexual abuse is coming up, possibly pushed forwards by discussions about AIDS and safe sex, and also that a number of current studies indicate that a significant number of lesbians and gay men are likely to have been sexually abused as children. I say that perhaps debates on child sexual abuse have come up differently in British lesbian circles in which child sexual abuse often has been discussed in the context of SM.

SM & survivors

I say, 'There has been no room yet, as far as I am aware, of a discussion in an open discussion about why you might, as a survivor of child sexual abuse, choose to practise SM in your sexual relationship. The survivor who is into SM is seen as continuing her victimization, or maybe as suffering from the disease of false consciousness. Lesbians are seen as deluded if they think they're able to deal with the trauma of abuse within or through SM activity. Child sexual abuse is no focus to SM that they cannot be seen separately. I find this frustrating because I would really like to be able to have a discussion which looked non-judgmentally at the emotional and cultural components of lesbian SM and admitted the possibilities that for individual lesbians SM has the potential to be both positive and negative.' Are we to deny that lesbian sexual abuse survivors who practise SM present their reasons for this positively are all liars or dupes? Without hearing them out, how can we really understand or judge which women experienced abuse analysis might be going on? If we are to believe women's experiences, whose experiences do we believe?

In the Feminist Review interview, Cindy was reporting on developments within American lesbian and gay communities dealing with experiences of child sexual abuse and SM practice. I came in with an opinion that we, in Britain, would find it hard even to talk about this situation if it existed in Britain. My belief is that unless you can have open discussion on difficult issues, unless you arrive for honesty, unless you allow for difference in experience and opinion and analysis within feminism around contentious areas, then you won't ever resolve them and may sink into sectarianism. Look — as much as Sheila Jeffreys and Rachel Wingfield seem to weld to the view that there was once something called lesbian feminism which we all marched to the tune of — this is an illusion. It is simplification beyond belief which leads Rachel Wingfield to say: 'All of which brings Jeffreys back to her original insight: the fact that we once could assume to be shared, and values within lesbian feminism have now been largely eroded by the backlash both in and outside of our community.' Maybe it's said that Sheila Jeffreys (and Rachel Wingfield) still refuse to see that assumption, while tempting and understandable fifteen years ago, was based on an exclusive notion of who 'we' refers to, and continue to project blame for the loss of this illusion onto other lesbian feminists.

Difference & disability

In Lesbian Heresy, Jeffreys says that 'O'Sullivan has chosen to abandon the important feminist principle that women as a group should be equal, a principle set up in opposition to the routine disbelief of women practised by psychoanalysts and the justice system.' When and where, and by whom was this important feminist principle set down in stone? Surely before Black women, working class women, lesbians, etc. pointed out that there were vast differences between women and some of these differences were structured and institutional; pointed out that some of them were about power and exploitation. This was not the result of wicked old poststructuralism; it came out of different groups of women's experience and analysis. It's not lack of idealism which makes many lesbian feminists now ask: 'Is there only one woman's voice to be believed?'

Contrary to Sheila Jeffreys and Rachel Wingfield, I do not believe the divisions and developments we see today are a simple story of weak-willed lesbian feminist soldiers subdued by consumerism and gay male culture, breaking rank with the movement — there was never a ranked phalanx of lesbian feminists. As well, the smirring political differences between lesbians meant that many were disaffected with the context and style of Jeffreys' politics years ago, if they'd ever heard of them.

It is offensive to me, who will go to my grave a lesbian feminist, and a damned active and radical one as well, to be caught up in ongoing sniping with other lesbian feminists. I don't want to silence Jeffreys or drum her out of lesbian feminism but neither do I want to be silenced by distortions of my politics.

Strands and labels

Jeffreys represents one strand within radical feminism, let alone a distinctly different one from whatever is left of socialist feminism (my politics of choice), postmodernist feminism, liberal feminism, feminist activism, studies etc. Recognition and willingness to engage in fierce argument, alliances, or complete disagreement, should not be dismissed as liberalism — labels heaped around by any 'side' hardly constitute a serious critique. I wish I could simply be amused that I am now a "pro-porn and SM writer" (Wingfield), as if this represented, true or false, the sum of my being. In the mid 1980s, when Susan Ardell and I wrote about the struggles over whether SM groups should be allowed to meet in the London Lesbian and Gay Centre (not to whip each other, just to talk), we ended up critiquing what Sheila Jeffreys then called revolutionary feminism. However, in that same article we also criticized SM dykes and others in the 'sexual fringe' group who claimed that sexual 'outlaw', by their very nature, were radical and politically progressive.

The reason I am not amused by a flattering of my politics is that I am, as always, a critical lesbian feminist. I do not believe porn is inevitably anti-women or a major cause of
violence against women. I do not believe SM is inherently negative or that the "lesbian sex industry" is causing the downfall of lesbian feminism. I am critical of some pornography and much of the business of pornography. I am critical of some aspects of SM, even if I am always curious about who draws the line, when and where. I do not exclude lesbian and gay radicals from criticism, even if I often view it in a different light.

Scouring Sex

Just because I am critical of Jeffreys, it does not follow that I think life is a Thatcherite dream of "free choice," or that I have stopped being an activist or an intellectually engaged feminist, lesbian, anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist, challenged socialist. Strange as it may seem to Jeffreys and Wingfield, ("Sex, it seems, should be exempted from any political analysis but a liberal one: anything goes," argues Wingfield) — I have always believed that sex is political and not exempt from feminist scrutiny because of its simplistic notion or privacy or "anything goes.", along with many, many others have regularly looked at sexuality and sexual practices critically and in the context of the whole of our lives. However, I don't think sexuality is the same as any other area of life. But that's too big a discussion to pursue here. When I look back at the interview I did with Cindy Patten in Feminist Review I can see that the section on child sexual abuse was truncated in the published version. I regret that editing cut too much, particularly of Cindy's contribution. Although I believe the published words do not diminish the reality and seriousness of child sexual abuse, an unsympathetic reading might misinterpret them. When dealing with such an emotive subject, I could have insisted that more space be devoted to it and clarified some of the words which have subsequently been used, more than once, to attack us. However, I recognize that no matter what clarifications or expansions had been included, some readers would still have disagreed with us.

Common Ground

Which brings me to the end. I suppose the reason I'm taking up so much time and energy and possibly your space, is that I take lesbian feminism in its different shapes and forms seriously. I do think there are significant ways in which we can share common goals and, if not whole visions, at least parts of them. Through the years, I have read Trouble & Strife more often than not. I don't call myself a radical feminist but I've always been influential by women who are. Perhaps I should thumb my nose at the shit which still goes on over the sex wars or join some of my academic sisters who just don't engage with Jeffreys. Then I think, why, I'm still around, still political, still passionately concerned about lesbianism, feminism, and changing the world. I still care! But I'm tired of it, tired of being patronized, misrepresented, and cheaply dismissed by women I disagree with. Come on, move a little. Allow me a tiny bit of feminist integrity.

Sue O'Sullivan

Dear T&S,

We were astonished to read in Rachel Wingfield's review of Sheila Jeffreys' book her characterization of our book Bud Girls & Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism, as suggesting that sexual violence and child abuse do not exist (T&S 28, "Selling Out: the Lesbian sexual revolution"). We certainly know that child abuse exists, and that the authors who wrote for Bud Girls & Dirty Pictures were battered children, and the book itself, in the introduction, refers to the appalling abuse that has been inflicted by social service "carers" on the Orkney children. Quite a few of our writers and the members of Feminists Against Censorship have been sexually assaulted and/or have been in abusive relationships. We certainly take exception to the allegation that we wish to "eroticize sexual violence." One of the principal authors of the book was first sexually assaulted when she was only 10 years old; we are highly unlikely to deny, let alone promote, sexual violence. Yours sincerely,

Avedon Carol & Nenine Pollard

Feminists Against Censorship

Editorial note: Because cases of sexual violence are difficult to prove, it is not necessarily mean that women or children were not abused. Our view is that we do not, and may never, have enough information to make definitive statements about the Orkney case.

* indicates that a letter has been cut

Call for papers for the
1996 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women

The 10th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, "Complicating Categories: Women, Gender, and Difference," will be held on June 7-9 at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA. Submit proposals in triplicate, postmarked by February 1, 1995.

Send proposals on US and Canadian topics to:
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Afro-American Studies Department, Harvard University, 1430 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA, USA 02138; or on other than North American topics to: Merry Wiener-Hanks, Center for Women's Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, PO Box 413, Milwaukee, WI, USA 53201; comparative US/non-US topics may be sent to either Program Committee Co-Chair.
JUST SAY NO:
The Empire of Assertiveness

Debbie Cameron exposes the questionable origins of Assertiveness Training and takes a critical look at its increasing popularity. She looks at the consequences of substituting AT for feminism.

In the late 1970s, when I was first involved in women's politics, I was vaguely aware of something called "assertiveness training" (AT). I occasionally met women who had done it, and there were ads in Spare Rib for assertiveness groups as well as CR groups. I thought of AT and CR in similar terms, as expressions of the principle 'the personal is political'. In CR you learned that women were systematically oppressed, and if one logical response was to campaign for structural change, another was to try and change certain aspects of your everyday behaviour, by standing up for your rights and refusing to take sexist shit. That’s what I thought "assertiveness" meant, and I assumed that, like CR, it was a feminist invention. Recently, though, I’ve discovered I was wrong: AT has a history that might raise a few eyebrows among feminists. And it’s worth going into this, because where CR has declined, AT has gone from strength to strength: it seems to be everywhere you look. In many workplaces it’s a cornerstone of the equal opportunities policy. Businesses often send women managers on a course (sometimes threateningly entitled "leadership skills" or "personal effectiveness"), and if you work in the public sector, health, social services, education or local government, the chances are your employer will sponsor some kind of AT for women. Students can get it through the students’ union, or if they’re on an access course or a course for women 'returners'.

Instead of long-drawn-out Freudian therapy meant to give patients an understanding of the root of their problem, they favoured a more pragmatic approach, getting rid of the patient’s "dysfunctional" behaviour and substituting something more "appropriate".

The aspect of behaviour that AT was designed to modify was communication with other people. In practice, AT teaches you a particular way of expressing yourself. Trainers are told that everyone has the right and obligation to express their needs, desires and feelings clearly, directly and honestly (doing it indirectly is "manipulative" and not doing it at all is "passive"), but without infringing other people’s right to their needs and feelings (which means not being "aggressive"). The interactive strategies which go along with this, and which are practised in role-play exercises, include using "I - me" language that focuses on your feelings and not the other person’s, making requests and refusals directly, without hinting, hedging or excuses, and refusing to be silenced or ignored, if necessary repeating your point until you get a satisfactory answer (this is called "the cracked record technique").

The rationale for this sort of training came from clinical experience. A lot of the people therapists see, among other problems, have "poor communication skills". They may be extremely passive or withdrawn because of depression or long-term institutionalisation: conversely they may be extremely aggressive, or totally out of touch with reality and incapable of interacting ‘appropriately’ with others. ‘Assertiveness’ is supposed to be the golden mean between passivity and aggression. Depending on the type of patient, the benefits of teaching it are thought to include helping people participate actively in their own therapy, raising their self-esteem, giving them the ability to function normally in the outside world, and teaching them to express aggressive feelings verbally rather than in anti-social acts.

Dealing with ‘deviants’

If you associate it with feminism, as I did before I looked into its history, it comes as something of a shock to discover how strongly AT has been linked with the treatment of psychiatric patients. Even more startling is its popularity with therapists treating sex offenders. During the 1950s and 60s, AT was often used with homosexual men, who were defined at the time as suffering from a mental illness. Presumably the reasoning was that homosexuality was caused by low self-esteem or inability to resist peer group pressure (the same reasoning is now applied to drug-taking and underage sex).

Other sexual ‘deviants’ may be prescribed AT to help them verbalise anger and sexual desire instead of erupting to violence. A clinical textbook published as recently as 1991 tells us that men who batter women can be good candidates for AT. At the same time, the book warns that although battered women often suffer from low self-esteem or depression, it is potentially very risky to recommend assertion to them, since the result may be to provoke [sic] further violence. The author also cites with approval an AT course designed for Puerto Rican women, from which the topic of ‘saying no’ to male partners had been removed. Submission of Latinas to husbands, he learn, is a ‘relatively intransigent cultural norm’ which the therapist must respect if the training is to be ‘effective’ and ‘socially valid’.

If AT really was about empowering women, this sort of thing would be paradoxical to say the least. In reality, however, AT’s purpose has always been to make individuals conform to a certain model of social competence and mental health. This model, in even the textbook I have mentioned, is traditionally conceived in the image of ‘mainstream societal values’, which are white, middle-class, individualistic and male. In the 1950s, mainstream values included overt homophobia: in the 1990s they include a vague and muddled multiculturalism which leads to such travesties as the Puerto Rican example. The common thread running through this sorry history is that AT aligns itself with the status quo. It aims to make people ‘better’ in the sense of closer to whatever the current ideal is.

If this argument is correct, an obvious question: why did AT become so strongly
associated with feminism? Did feminists in the 1970s not assert their conservatism, or did they "usually" believe that what passed for "normal" femininity at the time was a pathological state?

**Feminism and assertiveness**

The answer is, it depends which feminists you're talking about. Some apparently did take the view that the way women were socialised under patriarchy produced what amounted to large-scale personality disorder. Others made the political link between AT and CR. An early popular book called *The New Assertive Woman*, published in America in 1975, suggested that a "an active force, assertiveness training goes beyond the process of consciousness-raising, by preparing women to act on what they recognize as problems".

On the other hand, in the 1970s there were radical feminists who were critical of AT. The problem they saw was that in urging women to change their communicative behaviour so they could operate more effectively in the world, assertiveness training was failing to question the way the world itself was organised. AT in effect tells women that something is wrong with the way they are: it assures them it is not their fault, society is to blame, but nevertheless it is they who have to change.

This seems to me an accurate analysis, and it is an important reason why the story of AT in the 1970s has been one of ever-increasing popularity in the mainstream. Employers who have seized on AT as part of their equal opportunities policy may mean well, in the sense that they genuinely want to help women, but at the same time, they appreciate how cheap and non-disruptive AT is compared to what would be needed to talk to institutional sexism: changing your hiring practices, challenging men's workplace behaviour, setting up a nursery. AT is part of the fairy tale that women don't get systematically held back, they simply 'under-achieve'. The problem is in their minds and their behaviour — which can be altered through training, while everything else stays exactly as before.

Not only employers, but a lot of women have an investment in the idea that transforming aspects of your behaviour can transform your life — this is a central theme of consumerist culture, and it has been exploited in the marketing of AT as a cure-all of women's problems. The feminist psychologist Mary Crawford points out that there's something fishy about the way clinical practitioners over time made women rather than men the main targets for AT. In principle, AT addresses not only problems of passivity (a stereotypically female tendency) but also aggression (a stereotypically male one with far more serious anti-social consequences). Yet the problem of women's unassertiveness got disproportionate emphasis. Crawford notes that the therapeutic professions have a long history of trying to control women, regarding them not only as more in need of control but also as more "receptive" to it than men. This "receptiveness" is even more important once AT moves out of the clinic and becomes a business supporting armies of "consultants". If you're looking for people who are worried about their supposed inadequacies and willing to spend time and money on self-improvement, middle class women (or those who employ them) are the obvious market. For these potential customers, a bit of mildy feminist rhetoric is a good selling-point. Probably the most influential British text on assertiveness, Anne Dickson's *A Woman in Your Own Right*, contains the following passage, beautifully judged to appeal to the "I'm-not-a-feminist, AT!" crowd:

> Given our prevailing culture, women are, with obvious exceptions, in far more powerful positions than men. This can be made into an overtly political issue — but that is not the point of this book. It is designed to help individual women in their own particular settings to live more assertively and powerfully. It provides simple, effective tools to accomplish this, and in some small measure, potentially to change the overall status of women in our society.

I don't dispute that some versions of AT had a much more explicit feminist agenda, and were done in the context of autonomous women's groups without the presence of experts or the intrusion of the profit motive. Nor do I dispute that changing your individual behaviour can be a necessary part of feminist politics. What bothers me about AT is partly the way it gets used as a substitute for other kinds of change; but also the actual content of it, the kind of behaviour it urge you to adopt. As I mentioned before, this behaviour is based on a covert male norm; and there is also an argument that a lot of "assertive" speech is so linguistically bizarre no-one of either sex has anything to gain from it.

**Talk like a man**

When you look at the linguistic content of assertiveness textbooks, what's immediately striking is that all the ways of speaking you are told not to use are features of what used to be called "women's language"; a style said to hold women back by making them sound 'unconventional' and 'lacking in authority'. Compared to men's, women's speech is supposed to be more indirect, more polite, to use more hedging expressions (like 'well' and 'you know' and 'sort of'), more tag questions (like 'nice day, isn't it?' or 'I'll do it tomorrow, OK?') and more trivialisation (letting the pitch of your voice go up instead of down at the end of a sentence). AT manuals warn against all these things. Apart from 'expressing feelings honestly', all the rules of assertive speech reflect a way of talking stereotypically associated with men: direct, firm, authoritative and to the point. Some texts I've seen quite openly urge women to imitate in a book called *Leadership Skills for Women*, for example, says: "Men typically use less body language than women. Watch your body language to see how to do it."

There are two problems with this. One is that the stereotypes of 'women's language' and 'men's language' are exactly that — stereotypes, not accurate descriptions of how women and men actually talk. Probably no real person uses the extremes of unassertive 'women's language' that come in for criticism in training materials. The other problem, though, is that whatever difference does exist between men and women are being interpreted through a 'deficit model', the idea that one way of behaving (women's, needless to say) is intrinsically worse than the other. But this inevitably turns out to be a social prejudice rather than a reasoned assessment. Hedging and rising intonation are "ineffective" and 'lacking in authority', while 'less' body language is preferable to more, simply because of their association with women and men respectively.

Most linguists have rejected this kind of deficit model because it's biased and circular (if people are prejudiced against the way women talk, the theory that women's way of talking holds them back becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy). Gender differences in speech, to the extent they exist (which is variable, depending which women and men you study in what context), are often better explained as the result of differences in status or power. In AT books, however, even the clearest statements that effect are reinterpreted through the deficit model so that women are held responsible for their own supposed ineffectualness. *Leadership Skills for Women* has this to say about the well-known research finding that men interrupt women: "statistics show that women allow themselves to be interrupted up to 50% more often than men. Don't contribute to those statistics! Not only is this a tendentious reading of the relevant research, it is a stunningly useless piece of advice." If the way women speak (accepting for the sake of argument that we can generalise) is not so much causing them to 'lack authority' as reflecting the fact that most are in relatively powerless positions, it follows that teaching women a more assertive style does not solve the underlying problem. It may even be counter-productive. Mary Crawford and her colleague Amy Gervai have reviewed research on how real people evaluate so-called assertive behaviour. It seems that what experts think is healthy assertiveness strikes others as 'aggressive' and 'rude'; and this effect is magnified in the case of assertive women. Talking like a man, or the
stereotype of a man, exposes women to charges of being "unfeminine" or "uppity". "Talking like a woman," she caries, is the stigma of "lacking authority". It's a classic double bind.

**Assertive codeword**

Gervais and Crawford suggest that one reason why assertive speech is valued negatively regardless of the speaker's sex is simply that it breaks the rules of normal conversation. What could be more peculiar, not to say irritating, than someone who repeats the same thing over and over again or talks exclusively about "I" and "me"? When Anne Dickson informs readers they should stop "paddling" utterance, explaining that "I'm terribly sorry to trouble you but I wonder if you could get me a clean cup" is manipulative and confusing, and what you should really say is "I'd like you to get me a clean cup", you wonder what planet she's been living on and whether she has any grasp of the rules of ordinary politeness. Assertiveness experts do not seem to trouble themselves overmuch about how their magic formulas actually sound when uttered in public, but from a linguistic point of view they are talking utter codewords. If indirection were really "dysfunctional", the correct answer to the question "have you got the time?" ought to be in "half past two, "but yes" or "stop beating about the bush".

When I interviewed women about their experiences of AT, I found few swallowed the more nonsensical parts of it whole: most were sceptical about the specific techniques and formulas AT courses recommended. Many did feel they had gained something, but often they identified the opportunity to talk to other women as the best thing about it — in other words, it was what they learnt from each other that counted most, not what they learnt from "experts". In this respect, AT can be like CR, especially if the trainer is a feminist and initiates political discussions (something that was reported to me by several interviewees). Interestingly, some women who were sceptical about what they did on their course still found the experience liberating, because it seemed to prove there is no magic recipe for success and thus relieved the pressure to be "perfect". One woman told me that playing roles had given her the confidence to "be herself". It is not surprising that a lot of women, whether politically aware or not, should look for strategies to help them cope in a far from ideal world. The behaviour modification approach has its limits, but it also has its uses, and in practice therefore AT can be useful. What worries me, though, is how many women come to AT (or are sent to it) because of an unquestioned belief in the deficit model that locates the problem in women's ways of communicating. If women have internalized a stereotype of themselves as ineffectual communicators, you can be sure that employers, educators, politicians and so on will also have incorporated it into their worldview, where it conveniently obscures the more fundamental causes of gender inequality.

Since mainstream institutions began paying lip-service to equal opportunities, there has been a steady stream of victim-blaming theories about women being their own worst enemies: fear of success, the Cinderella complex, lack of assertiveness. These are examples of the solution creating the problem: experts get rich by devising quack remedies for trivial or non-existent diseases. The positive effects of AT are outweighed by the negative effects, which can include wasting women's time and energy, reinforcing anxiety and creating new negative stereotypes.

Though there has been feminist criticism of AT in the past, nowadays the prevailing view seems to be that at least it doesn't do any harm. With all due respect to the women I interviewed who expressed enthusiasm for it, I feel that AT has never really got away from its history as a therapy for the 'socially dysfunctional'. Always a politically dubious concept, applied to women generally this is grossly insulting. Feminism is not about making better-adjusted women, it is about making a better world for real ones.
Question: When is a woman not a woman? Answer: When she plays sports. In an extract from her wonderful book, The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football, Mariah Burton-Nelson exposes the hypocrisy and confusion surrounding sex testing of women in sport.

At the 'Femininity Control' outposts of international competitions, the world's best female athletes are tested to determine if they are male impostors. Supposedly, the tests are designed to protect female athletes from men who would attempt to use their superior muscle and stamina to unfairly sneak into and win women's competitions. In actuality, the tests reinforce the myth of female athletic inferiority.

The tests seem misguided at best, misogynist at worst. They are ineffective, detecting women with genetic anomalies who have no unfair advantage, and passing over steroid users, who do have an unfair advantage. They are insulting: simply being a man would not give one an advantage over the best women athletes. And they are philosophically unsound. In some sports, women have an advantage, yet men are never tested to see if they might be women in disguise.

The problem with sex testing is it implies that women's capabilities are more limited than they really are,' says Alison Carlson, a tennis coach and writer who has spent five years researching, writing, and speaking about gender verification. 'If you've got capabilities beyond a certain point, you're not a woman. It's backwards. Instead we should say, by definition, if a woman does this, women can do it.'

The first modern 'sex check' was conducted in 1936 after Helen Stephens defeated Stella Walsh in the Olympic 100-meter dash, and Walsh's Polish coach complained, imitating that Stephens might be a man. Stephens, now in her seventies, recalls feeling 'hurt and embarrassed, of course,' but went along with the United States Olympic Committee's request to have a male doctor 'look her over' to make sure she was female. She passed.

Walsh, ironically, fared worse during the inadvertent sex check that occurred during an autopsy after her death in 1980. The coroner found that Walsh, who had lived her entire life as a woman, was not a man exactly, but had been born with ambiguous genitalia. 'So it was a case of the pot calling the kettle black,' says Stephens with a light-hearted laugh.

Dora Ratjen, a 1936 Olympic high jumper from Germany, was never tested but admitted in 1955 that he was in fact a man, and had been forced by the Hitler Youth Movement to compete as a woman 'for the honor and glory of Germany.' These women had jumped higher than he did at those 1936 Games, but he had set a women's world record two years later. Of his disguise he said, 'For three years I lived the life of a girl. It was most dull.'

In 1946, two French runners who had led a women's relay team to second place in a European championship were found to be living as men. 'Whether they had pretended to be women or were later pretending to be men was not absolutely clear,' writes Adrienne Blue in Grace Under Pressure.

In 1967, organizers first officially instituted what have variously been called sex tests, femininity tests, and gender verification tests at international competitions. Not coincidentally, this new policy arose during a decade when women were beginning to shatter previous records and to narrow the gap between male and female performances. It was also a time when women (and men) were beginning to take steroids to build strength. Because the drugs can produce much like secondary sex characteristics in women, female athletes with deep voices and beards were showing up at meets. Other women were trying these athletes suspiciously, unsure what was going on. They heard rumors that men were masquerading as women.

In the prefeminist era of the late 1960s, women were barred from marathon running and other 'masculine' competitions, but they were beginning to resist those restrictions. Serious female athletes were more severely harassed than they are today, often publicly ridiculed as 'manly' or 'dykes.' Such gibes inspired some women to welcome testing as a way to quell rumors, to prove that they were female, and to weed out the 'masculine' women, whether those women seemed masculine because they were on steroids, because they were actually men, or because they were lesbians.

Pat Connolly, a three-time Olympian from that era, explains: 'At 17, I knew that some of my competitors had deep voices, beards, and
The only woman publicly to contest her disqualification so far is Spanish runner Maria Jose Martinez Patino. In 1985, at age twenty-four, Patino failed the sex test at the World University Games in Kobe, Japan. She had passed at the Helsinki World Championships in 1983, but had forgotten to bring her ‘femininity certificate’ to Japan. “I could barely comprehend what was happening,” she told Carlsson. “I was scared and ashamed, but at the same time angry, because I couldn’t see how my body was different from the other girls.” In shock, she did as told: triggered a foot injury.

Patino’s genetic anomaly is called androgen insensitivity. To understand it is to understand the mind-blowing concept that human beings do not fall exclusively into two categories, male and female.

People generally fall into two categories, but not all of us are so clearly in one camp or the other. Says psychologist John Money, a leading sex researcher from Johns Hopkins University, “The difference between male and female is not just black and white. It is a biological continuum.”

Gender is determined by five variables: chromosomes, hormones, gonads, external genitalia, and the most definitive one, the gender of assignment: what midwives, doctors, or parents say when they look at a newborn and proclaim, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy.” Usually, all of the variables are consistent: a baby with XX chromosomes, for instance, will have more estrogen than testosterone, will have ovaries, uterus, vulva, and vagina, and will be called a girl at birth.

During the first six weeks of embryonic development, internal and external genitalia are undifferentiated. This “biopotential” tissue could develop into either ovary or testes, labia or scrotal sac, clitoris or penis. Which way it goes depends on hormonal secretions: if androgens are secreted, the tissue usually develops along male lines. If no androgens are secreted, the embryo will become female. Female is what happens if no hormones intervene, regardless of genetic XX or XY designation.

But sometimes, XY embryos can’t react to androgens, so the fetus develops along female lines. This is what happened to Maria Patino.
and the approximately one out of 5,000 to 10,000 people who are androgen-insensitive. Patoño’s body ignored the androgens and went ahead and developed as a girl. Thus the physicians declared her female and she always thought of herself as female until astonished by the XY test results.

The athletic relevance of androgen insensitivity is that these people are immune not only to the hormones their own bodies produce, but also to steroids. Rather than giving them an unfair advantage in competition against women, their condition ensures that they will have no unfair advantage. There is no reason to disqualify them from Olympic competition against women. But they are disqualified.

Patoño was banned from competition; she was ridiculed as a freak in newspapers and on the streets of Madrid; she lost her athletic scholarship; she was expelled from her Spanish national athletic residence; her coach was told he could no longer train her; and her girlfriend and boyfriend left her. Her records were struck from the books.

Men, too, have anomalies: some appear male but are genetically XX; others have XX chromosomes; others are XX or XY hermaphrodites (possessing some aspects of both male and female anatomy, both internally and externally) who were assigned the male gender at birth. Some boys and men have no testicles, or even a uterus. Some men have genetic conditions that lead to unusual height or weight or strength. But men are never banned from competitions for being ‘too malelike’ or ‘too femalelike.

Ironically, the Barr body test and the updated (since 1992) sex test, the polymerease chain reaction test, not only miss sterility users, they also miss the not currently occurring condition that does give women a ‘malelike’ advantage: adrenal hyperplasia, a hormonal imbalance in which girls with XX chromosomes develop muscle patterns (and genitalia) similar to men’s. This occurs in about one in one thousand women — common enough that at marathons, for instance, a few of the runners would have this condition. According to Dr. Maria New, head of the pediatrics department at New York Hospital — Cornell Medical Center, several women who have won Olympic gold medals have had adrenal hyperplasia.

The Barr body test produced false positive results between 5 percent and 15 percent of the time. Kirsten Wegler, for instance, erroneously failed the test in 1985 before an international swim meet. During a good team meeting, her female teammates were handed their femininity certificates (‘fem cards’, they’re called) but Wegler was told she would have to return to the lab for further testing. After the second test, doctors told her she might not be able to have children. ‘I was crying and really freaked out,’ she recalls. Wegler’s parents arranged to have more sophisticated tests taken, and those results — four months and many dollars later — revealed that Wegler has typical XX chromosomes and no abnormalities. Only then was she granted her fem card.

The polymerease chain reaction test, a purported improvement on the Barr body test, is accurate 99 percent of the time. This means that one out of every hundred women tested will be falsely informed that she is not female. For the Summer Olympics of 1992, that would equal 30 of the 3,008 female competitors.

Physicians worldwide, including the American College of Physicians, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and the hospital originally contracted to conduct testing at the Calgary Olympics, have opposed sex testing, saying it is discriminatory and lacks scientific merit. In 1988 editorial in the Journal of the American Medical Association, geneticist Dr. Albert de la Chapelle of the Department of Medical Genetics at the University of Helsinki called for an end to testing, saying, ‘Eliminating screening would probably have little or no effect’ on who won the championships, and it might restore a few personal dignities.’

Helen Stephens approves of sex testing, saying ‘I guess they have to do something to keep men out’ but does not harbor any animosity toward Stefi Walch, her one-time nemesis, and does not want Walch’s eleven world records and two Olympic medals to be expunged from the books. ‘Most of the girl athletes had thoughts that she wasn’t exactly kosher,’ says Stephens, ‘but it was an unfortunate case of birth defect.’

Kirsten Wegler, who suffered the horror of a false positive test, now speaks out against the tests: ‘If it’s a choice between possibly competing against impostors, and hurting even only a few women, I’d rather compete against a man.’

Maria Putino was reinstated in 1988 after sex test opponents argued her case before the IOC. She now considers the experience to be a ‘I’m sure it’s the same sense of incredible shame and violation.’

Taekwondo world champion Lynette Love says of testing, ‘It stinks. Why test the men?’

Older athletes, especially those who have been tested many times or who have ‘proven’ their feminality through motherhood, don’t seem to spend much time thinking about the test. Deborah Holloway, a mother and a 1988 Olympic silver medalist in taekwondo says, ‘It didn’t bother me too much. I had no anxiety about it. They said they had to do it because there was once a man who was really a woman, or vice versa. I forget.’

After extensive review the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) in 1993 recommended abolishing all gender verification tests. An IAAF council established to consider the medical, ethical, and philosophical aspects of testing had concluded that there is no indication that men are currently masquerading as women, and there is no evidence that the people eliminated by the test have any biological advantage, and besides, ‘The urine sample ... required to detect illicit substances must be produced under direct visualization; thus simple visual inspection at that time would readily suffice to exclude men masquerading as women.’

The IOC, however, persists in testing female athletes, ‘a philosophy at odds with recommendations by major endocrine, genetic, and obstetric/gynecologic bodies,’ says the IAAF. The IOC’s position, stated by Prince Alexandre de Merode, Chairman of the IOC Medical Commission, is that testing has eradicated the ‘denunciations, rumors, and scandals’ that persisted before 1968 and were ‘beemirching sport and the reputation of persons concerned.’ Eliminating the tests would lead to ‘a resurgence of scandals of which sport would be the victim.’

To understand who exactly is being protected by gender testing, consider what happens when transsexuals (men who, through surgical,
hormonal and cosmetic interventions, 'become' women) attempt to enter women's competitions. If keeping people with 'male-like advantages' out of female competitions were the fundamental concern of the men in charge of such decisions, one would think they would refuse access to people who have XY chromosomes, who were identified as men at birth, and who, until recently, lived as men. In addition to male muscle mass, height, and weight, these men-who-become-women have all the privileges of sports access that most boys and men receive: good coaches, good facilities, good school programs, and community and family support. Renee Richards, for instance, was born an unambiguous male named Richard Raskind. He attended a boy's prep school and the then-all-male Yale University, where he received athletic training, and competed against men. A New York Yankees scout expressed interest in his ability.

When, after his sex-change operation, Renee Richards announced his/her intention to play women's singles in the 1976 U.S. Open at Forest Hills, tennis's governing bodies (U.S. Tennis Association, World Tennis Association, and U.S. Open Committee) resisted, instituting a requirement that all men take a chromosomal sex test. Richards refused and did not play. The next year, Richards took the case to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that "this person is now female" and that requiring Richards to pass the test was "grossly unfair, discriminatory and inescapable, and violative of her rights." Richards then competed in the women's professional circuit for a brief, undistinguished career before returning to her ophthalmologic practice. Other male-to-female transsexuals have been similarly protected and allowed to compete against women.

Small children sometimes believe that if a boy puts on a dress or high heels, he becomes a girl. Adults realize that this is impossible, misguided thinking. Yet many adults have become convinced that if a boy engages in a sport that has historically been considered "female," he automatically becomes a girl. This in fact produces exactly the opposite effect: it reinforces his desire to become a boy. Girls begin to feel pressures and to resist activities that they believe are "male." This becomes another factor for the many girls who choose to become transsexual at some point in their lives.

The truth is, men are too weak to play football—too fragile, too delicate to withstand the rigors of the game. And men said that a very good ten-year-old soccer player must be male. Yet a very good ten-year-old soccer player is more likely to not be female. In Arlington, Virginia, the youth soccer program is divided into two gender-based leagues because 'boys get frustrated and discouraged with coed, so we separate them,' says coach and organizer Mac Golden. "The girls are so much better."

In the fall of 1989, a Union Bridge, Maryland girl named Tanwa Hummood suffered severe internal injuries after being tackled in a high school football game. Her spleen and half of her pancreas had to be removed. She was one of 109 girls who played high school football that year. Girls who play football are not more likely to get injured than boys who play football. But the town mayor responded: "The feeling from a lot of the people was she shouldn't have been there on the football team anyway. A female playing a man's game has created a lot of hard feelings in this community." The football coach, Terry Changovis, said, "You realize that you are at a major biological disadvantage because women are not as strong as men."

No one talks about the "major biological disadvantages" of the smaller, weaker boys and men who are injured on football fields every day. No one seems to worry about the dislocated shoulders, twisted knees, broken ankles, and concussions that men commonly suffer during high school, college, and pro football games. Football causes more injuries, including deaths, per player than any other American sport. Virtually all of his victims are men.

In the 1992 season, almost five hundred players—21 percent of the total National Football League player list—endured injuries severe enough to keep them from at least one game. Seventy-eight percent of retired football players suffers from permanent disabilities. The average career of a pro football player is three and a half years; the average life expectancy is fifty-six years. Hospital emergency rooms handle 300,000 football-related injuries each year. According to the National Athletic Trainers' Association, 37 percent of U.S. high school football players were injured during the previous year badly enough to be sidelined for at least the rest of the day. And each year, about 20,000 high school football players die from football-related injuries.

Yet men say women are too weak to play football.

"Deborah Lane 'The Femininity Test'" women'sSports (July 1976) p 10.


"Ibid.

"Lamed, 1976 p11.


"Ibid p 29.

"Calling estrogen 'female' and testosterone 'male' is misleading, since both genders have some of each, and there is considerable overlap; some women have more testosterone than some men.


"Alice Carlston 'Chromosomal Count?' Mo. (October 1988) p 43.

"Carlston, p 29.

"April de la Chapelle 'The Une- Minutie of Sex Characteristic for Gender Verification of Female Athletes' Journal of the American Medical Association vol 256 (1986) pp 1920-23.

"Carlston, 1988 p 43.

"Carlston, p 29.

"Joe Leigh Simpson el al 'Gender Verification at the Next Olympic Games' Journal of the American Medical Association (January 28 1993) p 357.

"Ibid p 357.

"Prince Aemiste de Meine, in a letter to the Editor of the Independent (University of Helsinki: July 14 1987)


"National Federation of State High School Associations 1989-1990 Handbook (Kansas City, Missouri 1990) p 71

"Frank Hughes 'Female Football Player Dies from An Injury' Washington Post (October 29 1992) p D3.

"Ilaya Oppenheimer Dreams of Glory: A Mother's Struggle with Her Son's High School Football Team (Green Books 1991) p 67.


"Brimmel and Cole, 1990 p 5.\]
Black Women's Movement in Brazil

Alzira Rufino, founder member of The Black Women's Collective of Baixada Santista, Brazil, was in London this November to speak at a Conference on 'Fighting Sexism: North and South', organised by War on Want. We reprint here a summary of her talk/speech and information about the activities of The Black Women's House of Culture in Santos.

Violence against women is a world-wide phenomenon and is found in all cultures, races and social classes.

In Brazil, this violence is particularly serious because Brazilian society is very conservative in relation to women, and maintains especially patriarchal attitudes and behaviour towards Black women.

Women are greatly affected by the wretchedness suffered by the majority of the population. Approximately 30% of Brazilian families are headed by women, who, alone, support their children and other relatives. This reality is particularly that of Black Women, who occupy the lowest position in the income scale, undervalued and discriminated against in relation to white women.

It is necessary, therefore, when speaking about the situation of women in Brazil, to determine whether we are speaking of white women, Black women or indigenous women. Each one lives a different reality, with distinct challenges and achievements.

For centuries in Latin America, Black and indigenous women have suffered the reality of belonging to a crushed ethnic group, brutally exploited by colonization, deprived of their culture and beliefs, and subjected to a racial ideology classifying them as primitive and inferior, according to white cultural and racial standards.

In Brazil, as in the rest of the world, women are replicating the social, economic and cultural disadvantages they have been subjected to, together with the violence done to their human rights by sexism and racism. Women are also denouncing the material and spiritual evils caused by the economic elites who keep the world in a state of war, in permanent disequilibrium, destroying nature and throwing tons of food, leftovers from their greed, to the millions of humans who fight over their refuse. These people live above open sewers, anxiously awaiting the next day's hunger in their tin and cardboard shack, squeezed between rats and the remains of human indifference.

In Brazil, as in other South American countries, it is not surprising that the women's struggle and the struggle against racism are also a struggle for better living conditions and fight against poverty, against that poverty which increases our vulnerability to all kinds of violence.

The process of mobilisation of Brazilian women has been slow, but it is now having its effect in the political sphere, though only to a lesser degree for Black and indigenous women.

In recent years, women have been appointed to decision making positions. In 1986, 107 cities were headed by women mayors. A following election, in 1992, this number rose to 171, including 3 state capitals.

In the 1994 election there were further advances: two women were candidates for the Vice-Presidency of the Republic, 10 were contenders for the position of State Governor and 12 for the Senate. The biggest revelation came with the results of the Senate elections: 40 women will begin their mandates next year, of whom 2 are Black, on the renowned Benedita da Silva. Both belong to the Workers Party and have overcome the historic obstacles keeping Black women (approximately 32.4 million) at the lowest level of education and professional achievement.

Approximately 80% of domestic servants are Black, and it is in this function that most Black women begin their working life, being excluded from the so-called female professions. One of the elected Black senators is an ex-domestic servant, confirming this common reality of all Black women.

To better understand the position of Black women in the employment market, it is necessary to examine their opportunities of access to different levels of education. According to the 1982 census, 78% of white women completed elementary education, while only 22% of Black women achieved this level, of whom only 1% reached university. It is still common to see Black women with a higher level of education employed in domestic servants, unable to find other types of work.

The limited data available refers to Brazilian women in general, taking no account of the differences among them. Hence there exists no statistical analysis concerning Black and indigenous women in Brazil.

Indigenous women have also begun a process of communication between the various tribes and with Black women, so that their strength as women may finally be the united strength of the women of all ethnic groups.

We have held this position for the last 500 years, heroines of so many double and triple working days, contributing to the production of wealth, but relegated to the margins of development.

In Brazil, half the female population is represented by Black and indigenous women and their political and economic progress represents an authentic democratic revolution. In real terms, one cannot claim to embrace democracy as long as all women, and particularly Black and indigenous women, are excluded from power.
**Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra**  
**Black Women's House of Culture**

The Centre was established in June 1990 by the Black Women's Collective of Baixada Santista (the region surrounding the including Santos city), one of the oldest Black women's groups in Brazil, formed in 1986. The Collective has 23 women members who have responsibility for managing the Centre.

The Centre, which is the first centre to be established by the Black Women's Movement in Brazil, aims to provide a permanent forum for debate on racism, sexism, and offers legal support for the victims of racism, domestic and sexual violence. It also aims to empower Black women and raise community awareness about discrimination against women and Black people, through media campaigning and lobbying work with political parties, trade unions and popular organisations.

**Aims of the Centre**

1. To provide legal and psychological support to Black and white grassroots women who have been the victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, racial discrimination, or who need protection of their employment rights, covering the legal costs of those who cannot afford them.
2. To promote the services of the Centre through printed materials which are distributed to places such as women-only police stations and community centres.
3. To strengthen the activities of the Centre related to the issues of racial and sexual discrimination.
4. To strengthen training activities for women victims of violence.
5. To promote the training of monitors and women leaders of the community to take information about racial and sexual discrimination back to women in their communities.
6. To stimulate the creation of a new nucleus of women who will fight against violence in their communities.
7. To campaign and lobby locally and nationally to influence public and political opinion on policy issues related to racial and sexual discrimination.

Currently, the Centre is the only Black organisation offering legal services for victims of domestic violence and defending women's rights in court, as well as supporting racial discrimination cases.

- Women assisted by the legal services are also offered other services: meetings, seminars, workshops and discussion groups to raise awareness about the roots of racial/sexist violence, group and individual psychotherapy, helping in dealing with the police, and home visits.
- The Centre's counsellor runs group and individual sessions twice a week in the Centre.
- The Centre also runs a 24-hour phone service to assist women who are victims of domestic violence.
- The Centre runs a series of meetings and seminars in conjunction with community associations to talk to women about their legal rights, health, non-sexist/anti-racist education, sexuality, AIDS, sickle-cell disease, citizens' rights and contraceptive methods.
- The Centre publishes a bi-monthly newspaper for Black women called 'Estrepito', mainly covering the issues of violence against women and racism, legislation that is benefiting women's and Black people's rights and actions to combat all kinds of discrimination. The newspaper also acts as networking tool and information exchange for Black women's groups.
- Leaflets advertising the Centre's services are distributed to women's police and regular police stations, and handed out in shanty-towns and slum districts, in samba schools, and community centres.
- Since 1992, the Centre has been pressing local governments to implement some measures to give support to women victims of violence. The Centre is currently holding discussions with the municipal authorities of Baixada Santista to set up the first women's refuge in Santos.
- The Centre also runs a restaurant serving traditional Afro-Brazilian food, an Afro-wear clothes shop, and a bookshop stocking publications on ethnic and gender issues.

**Development, Ecology and Feminism**

Sue Lamb reviews Ecowomens, by Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva, and Women, The Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis by Rosi Braidotti et al. She draws out the implications for what has become known as global feminism.

While most people are aware of the ecological crisis now facing the world, what is not so frequently understood or acknowledged is the way that the burdens created by 'development' and the resulting environmental degradation are primarily shouldered by women, and that as such, ecology is, or should be, a central concern of feminists and the women's movement. Both the above books represent an attempt to inform environmentally, of the importance of protecting, and in many cases, improving the environment, in order to protect women and their children from increased poverty, work and exploitation, and decreased power and autonomy brought about by the degradation of the environment and middle-class development.

Both Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's and Rosi Braidotti et al's books challenge the implicit assumptions of the early 'interventionist' debate of the development crisis that women's main problem was their marginalisation from the basically benevolent processes of 'growth', 'progress', and 'development'. That increasing women's participation and their share of resources, land, wages, and job opportunities to that of men would be a necessary and sufficient solution to bring about dramatic improvements in their living conditions.

Both argue that empirical evidence and their experience as researchers and activists lead them to reject this 'solution'. Women's inclusiveness into the development process over the last decade or so has resulted in women being worse off now than at beginning of the UN Decade Women which began in 1975. Access to economic resources, income, and employment have all worsened, the burden of their work has increased, women's relative and even absolute health, nutrition, and educational status have all declined.

The 'integrationists' methods have failed, partly because of the nature of the development process into which women were to be integrated and partly, and no less importantly, on the grounds of traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices against women's social and economic participation. What is increasingly clear is that 'development' as a Western project...
to modernise the post-colonial world, does not bring about improved standards of living for the majority of people living in the South. Rather, it has increased poverty and feminised it, has increased gender inequality and led to the massive degradation of both local and global environments, which then further diminishes the well-being of all poor people, and especially women.

Taking responsibility

Ecottomism by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, is a wide-ranging, accessible and interesting account of women and the world in which they live. It provides much-needed evidence to show that women are not just passive 'victims' of male oppression, development and environmental crisis, but are prime actors in the management and protection of the environment. The authors stress women's centrality to both local and global economies, and their increasing prominence as activists and theorists in the emerging environmental movements and in the Women, Environment and Sustainable Development (WED) debate. In doing so they highlight the need to challenge all exploitative and destructive lifestyles and structures to educate ourselves about our relations to other women, and to develop an awareness of environmental and mal-develop- ment issues and their consequences on women in particular, and people in general. The emphasis is on action, not just on making changes to our own lifestyles. They firmly believe that the dominant systems of capitalism that have led to the exploitation of women must be overthrown. "We must stop exploiting the earth as well as women and children," they say, "and learn to live in harmony with nature."

"Catch-up"

They demonstrate how the dominant "catch-up" model of development is both logically and logically impossible. For example, the 6% of the world's population living in the USA currently consumes 30% of the world's fossil fuels; it is therefore impossible for the remaining 94% of the world's population to match that consumption. If they did, we exhaust reserves of all fossil fuels in 34-74 years. Since energy consumption is a major element of pollution, the already over-burdened "sink capacity" of the environment to absorb pollution would soon be swamped if the globe were to match the US in its consumption of fossil fuels. Yet an equitable distribution of current energy use would require the average North American to use only one-fifth of their present energy consumption. But it is not only the finite nature of resources that prevents the South 'catching-up', but also the fact, that the dominant development model, oriented as it is to meeting growth and profit, is in fact dependent on the further exploitation of both internal (women and ethnic groups etc) and external colonies (peoples in the Third World). This 'myth' inevitably leads to more destruction of the environment, further exploitation of the Third World, increased violence against women, and increased militarisation of men. In a similar way women in Western industrialised countries who believe that women can simply 'catch-up' with men through the establishment of equal rights for women, are also sadly mistaken, since the status quo, the political, economic and cultural structures in these societies, is dependent on the continued exploitation and subjugation of women as wives and workers. Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva believe that women cannot have equality in a man's world that is dependent on their inequality; if we remove the base of this oppression then we radically change the system.

"Catch-up" is a radical critique of mainstream development, ecological and environmental thought and practice that emphasises the need for both feminist and ecological activism to ensure women's survival as well as that of the planet. It coheres new insights into the relations between First and Third World movements that takes account of both the differences and commonalities between them with a demand for new theories and strategies of feminist action as well as new models of women's social, political and economic participation. This results in a passionate plea for the rejection of ethnocentric (white, Western, middle-class, educated, colonialist and neo-colonialist) perspectives and the adoption of a 'subsistence' perspective based on a belief in the importance of perspectives generated by people who are marginalised in political, social and economic decision-making.

This "subsistence perspective", is informed by 'marginalised people', feminists and ecological grassroots movements, and other perspectives that define the 'good-life' radically differently from the dominant perspectives of either the 'growth-oriented' capitalist or socialist 'industrialist systems'. This, they believe, entails:

- A realisation that the main aim of 'economic activity' is not to produce an ever-increasing mountain of consumer goods, but activity aimed at the "creation and recreation" of life
- Acknowledging that man's domination of women and nature is inextricably linked, and that we cannot create non-exploitative relations with nature without fundamentally challenging human relations, especially those between women and men
- The use of participatory democracy, not only in political, but in all social, economic and technical decision-making
- Abandonment of the notion of a 'universal fix' and/or 'technological fix' to solve the diverse and complex problems of different cultures in their different environments, since such a notion has been a major constituent of the environmental and development crisis
- A new paradigm of science based on non-exploitative, ecologically sound, feminist, principles informed by the subsistence perspectives.
- The reintegration of work and culture, and of work as both a burden and pleasure. It is also necessary, they believe, to reintegrate spirit and matter, if we are to escape both "mechanical materialism" and "airy spirituality".

(p 220)

- Demands for the preservation and regeneration of nature.
- A challenge to the sexist division of labour and the separation of 'private' and 'public' spheres of activity that ensures that women will do the work, while men make decisions, and theorise subsistence perspectives.
- The demilitarisation of men and society, and their closer involvement in caring and nurturing both of people and the environment.
That we in the West be prepared to make changes, and curtailing our extravagant lifestyle. As Mahatma Gandhi pointed out over 60 years ago, "To have its standard of living a tiny country like Britain had to exploit half the globe. How many gulls will India need to exploit to have the same standard of living?" (quoted p 332)

It is particularly important to review this particular strand of ecofeminism, and hence this particular book, because Shiva has been so influential in the formation and articulation of WED debates, that have informed much of current thinking in the 'public' arenas of the UN, IMF, World Bank, governments, and aid and development organizations, as well as some elements of the 'Green' movement. These debates are long overdue, as is a feminist analysis of the crises of development and the environment, since women are central to the issues raised. They are, as Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva point out, primary 'managers' of the environment and eco-systems since they are theoretically, and thus practically, more closely associated with 'nature' in most cultures. Feminists have analysed the growing feminization of poverty, women's increased responsi- bility for the survival of both themselves and their life-styles, women's increased workloads, as well as their overall decrease in literacy, comparative health and welfare, longevity, and even in their absolute numbers. Women can thus be seen as the main victims of male-develop-
development and environmental crisis they reject any feminist analysis that insists on seeing men as wholly responsible for the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. However since men dominate the institutions controlling development, they stress that we cannot ignore the masculinisation of power. They therefore call upon feminists to question and transform all ways of thinking, especially those associated with ‘Western’ science, technology and the project of rationality, which are simply tools for the domination of both people and nature, whose uncritical application threatens bio and cultural diversity and indeed all life on this planet. As feminists, and other social emancipatory movements, challenge the very basis of a Western epistemology that effectively invalidates all ‘other’ knowledge, the scientific claim to an ‘objective’ and ‘universal’ truth, Rosi Braidotti therefore argues that if we are to effect any fundamental and effective change, we must question all epistemologies, and the way that they create knowledge.

Rosi Braidoti et al criticise all ‘standpoints’, including feminist standpoints, and claim that their own analysis presents a unique insight into the basis of Western (male) thinking as fundamentally dependent on the existence of the ‘other’ and as the main organising principle of society. Yet as Maria Mies (feminist marxist) and Vandana Shiva (feminist, Southern, Alternatives for development standpoint) reach many similar conclusions and argue that women (and others) can deconstruct Western science, rationality and beliefs, and redefine existing structures in order to make them less discriminatory, not only for women, but ultimately for all people. Many share the same objective of removing hierarchical oppositions and the power structures that maintain them. But according to Rosi Braidoti et al at the other approaches are all, to some degree or other, essentialist.

They acknowledge that postmodernism can deny women any position from which to speak and struggle for change. But they claim that their postmodernist focus on feminine subjectivity, ‘where multiple codes of power and knowledge are inscribed’ (p 174), takes them beyond the classical notions of materialism, towards a new (unique? superior?) form of ‘embodied’ materialism that sees the female subject in terms of ‘a network of simultaneous power formations’. They claim as new the insight that ‘the body is not an essence, and therefore not an anatomical destiny: it is rather an individual’s prime location in the world, one’s primary situation in reality’ (p 174).

Invisible women
While I must agree with this conclusion, I cannot agree that it is an exclusively postmodernist one. My readings of both feminist standpoint and materialist feminist theorists, is that they make similar non-essentialist claims. However they manage to avoid those negative aspects of postmodernism theory which denies the existence of the category women and therefore the platform from which women speak and organise their opposition to patriarchal structures and practices, and the global homogenisation of culture. Rosi Braidoti et al believe that since women have been ‘universalised’ by the post-industrial system (Donna Haraway, 1990), they effectively disappear as sex-specific social agents. This position, as Rosi Braidoti et al acknowledge, not only ‘makes oppositional politics utterly redundant’ (p 54), but makes women, as women, disappear.

Since my own research is focused on the consequences of women’s ‘invisibility’ within economic theory (they do not work, are not productive, and whatever they do, it is not an economic activity unless it is exchanged for wages in a gender-segregated workforce). I find this approach highly questionable. The pervasiveness of economic indicators (GNP etc) and census that define women’s ‘primary occupations’ as ‘housewives’ and thus ensures that the majority of women’s labour is dismissed as non-economic, non-work (even if it is responsible for the production of 70% of the nutritional value of subsistence diets), almost all wood and water collection, and most care work performed in, and for, the community. This not only reinforces their theoretical invisibility, but also ensures their marginalisation in the developmental process. Women are only now managing to force themselves and their interests onto the social, political and economic agendas of governmental and international agencies, and since we have not achieved our aims of recognition, emancipation, and social justice, the abolition of women’s subjugation and exploitation, of sexual violence, and so on, it does not seem the right moment to abandon this recently won ‘visibility’. As Christine Delphine & Elsie Lestor have shown in their book Familiar Exploitation, the problems associated with the economic ‘invisi- bility’ of women are not restricted to women in difficulties.
considered to be an important factor in the abortion of 78,000 female foetuses between 1978 and 1983, since the cost of a sex test and the abortion of 'the dispensable sex' is less than the price of an average dowry. Of the 8,000 abortions carried out in Bombay in 1990 only one fruit was male. It is also significant that many women claim that they are prepared to abort female foetuses since they do not wish to bring daughters into the world to suffer as they have suffered. In some areas of Northern India practices such as female infanticide, differential treatment of girls when ill, poorer food, poorer education of mothers etc results in death rates for girls aged 1-4 being as much as double that for boys. Dowry deaths and the illegal practice of Suttee (widow burning) are both increasing in India, indicating a re-tranching of indigenous patriarchal values, but in the South of India, where women at least have access to the means of subsistence, fewer girls die, and women have better access to education.

Without such an analysis, evidence suggests, women are simply 'included' into development, their workloads increase and their only 'compensation' is increased status, not increased wages or recognition of their interests. They invariably remain excluded from any decision-making processes as to what type of development (or not) they require, what type of crops are best suited to their needs, and to those of their environment. Their access to vital resources, land and its products, is also diminishing as is the cultural independence needed for genuine emancipation. Therefore a thorough understanding of the inter-relationships between Western and indigenous patriarchal beliefs and practices is needed, if many more women in the South are not to be forced away from their dependency on the land into increasing dependency on men, with all the negative effects on their work and personal autonomy that this would imply.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, I believe, do achieve their professed aim to discuss the issues and problems that we face if we are to preserve life on the planet, the production of knowledge, poverty, development, and the industrialisation of all life forms, the search for cultural identity, and for freedom and self-determination. They lay their vision of 'a society benevolent towards nature, women, children and men' (p 20) open to criticism and further analysis. But even though Rosi Bradicti and her co-authors provide a thorough and wide ranging exploration of the histories and development of environmental, developmental and feminist thought, and explore the potential ground for coalitions with other groups, I find it ironic that despite their criticisms of feminist standpoint theory in general, and Sandra Harding, in particular, they believe her proposals for 'Rainbow Coalitions' (Sandra Harding 1992) to be the only way forward.

Sandra Harding's proposal for the creation of temporary and shifting 'Rainbow Coalitions', which build on areas of mutual concern where the interests and aims of different groups coincide, is firmly situated in a feminist standpoint which Rosi Bradicti and other postmodernist writers reject. By claiming unique understanding, and the superiority of 'situated knowledge' over a feminist standpoint, not only do they set themselves in opposition to other feminists (and women), but it appears, in hierarchical opposition at that. But since they argue that 'the embodiment of the subject is the political standpoint which allows for a critique of dualism as an oppositional form of thought which has the effect of psychic warfare.' (p 174) I find it surprising that they insist on maintaining, what to me appears to be a purely semantic division between a feminist standpoint and 'situated knowledge'. Not only are the nuances of their argument in support of such oppositions beyond me, but they are in a real sense 'purely academic' to the lives and struggles, hopes and aspirations of the huge majority of women. Vandana Shiva may not be 'politically correct' according to the new feminist hierarchy that appears to come out of feminist postmodernism, but she does address the issues of real concern to the great majority of women, in a way that is both accessible to them, and often inspiring.


Anita Stoler and Debra Merson, Familiar Exploitation: A New Analysis of Marriage in Contemporary Western Societies (Polity Press 1992)

Sandra Harding, 'Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology of Feminist Rainbow Coalition Politics', in Development and Change (Sage, Vol. 23, 1992, 343), 175-191

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Earthscan environment (Earthscan Publications 1986)

It all comes out in the wash: Lesbians in soaps

The last two years have been touted as the time when lesbians made it in mainstream television. Nicki Haste takes a closer look, and asks how are lesbians and lesbianism being re-presented.

Apparently lesbians are 'fashionable' in the mid-1990s and it is now possible to find images which indicate 'lesbianism' in wide-ranging cultural locations. The concept of 'lesbian chic' has been debated in numerous publications, from the August 1993 Vanity Fair front cover featuring Cindy Crawford and k d lang to Joanna Bissmoc’s Sunday Times article ('Lipstick on her collar', 5 June 1994). According to these recent articles you can see lesbians, or at least lesbian iconography, everywhere, and it no longer 'takes one to know one'. Yet lesbians remain suspicious and sceptical of articles directed towards a less predominantly straight audience. Cherry Smyth in Everywoman (April 1994) asks: "How do you tell a lesbian these days, now that androgyny is common and straight girls are impersonating dykes?"

Designer lesbianism

I share the view that 'lesbian chic' is a media-manipulated designer package which bears no resemblance to the daily lives of the majority of lesbians. 'Lesbianism' becomes a temporary fashion orfad for mainstream consumption. The popularity implied by 'lesbian chic' is far removed from the homophbic condemnation of Hackney school head, Jane Brown, which formed the media's other high-profile 'lesbian' story in 1994. Brown became the focus of anti-lesbianism in January 1994 after refusing subsidised tickets for a performance of Romeo and Juliet on the alleged grounds that it is a 'blantly heterosexual love story'. Her treatment exposed how lesbians are treated in reality by the mainstream media. 'Being seen is not the same as being heard, visibility is sometimes but not always power' (Lesbian Chic, Diva, April 1994)

This is an important point which makes us ask: Which images of lesbians are acceptable in the mainstream? And which are supported by the lesbian and gay press?

I am particularly interested in how being a lesbian is represented on TV. Where US culture supports the 'lesbian chic' phenomenon through exported images of the stylishly famous (eg Sandra Bernhard), the British press turn to a sensationalist lens on characters within British TV soaps: although still, it seems, with an emphasis on glamour. So David Plummer comments in the Times that TV's soap Emmerdale 'has recently made its prettiest character into a lesbian' (19 June 1993), and newspapers reproduce time and again the photograph of 'the kiss' (or lipstick kiss as it is sometimes called) between Channel 4's Brookside characters Beth and Margaret. When BCB's EastEnders introduced a lesbian storyline in June 1994, rumours about character, Della, in the Summer 1994 edition of lesbian magazine LIP implied that what was most significant for EastEnders' producers was how to construct her
fashion-consciousness and status as a consumer: 'given the budget that's been handed over for her wardrobe, she's going to be a designer dye with a vengeance.'

**Lesbian visibility**

Although aspects of the British and American press represent 'lesbian' through high-level visibility, style, and glamour, it is still more usual in the lesbian and gay press to find the accusation that 'you never see lesbians' in the media, at least not represented 'positively.' Hence, the exclamations of astonishment or celebration in publications such as *Lip*, *Diva* and the *Pink Paper* when lesbians do take to the TV screen. It is my sense that because of their scarcity on television, lesbian themes are often viewed by lesbian audiences with a mixture of celebration and trepidation. As Megan Radcliff comments in her *Time Out* review of *Brookside's* lesbian storyline: 'Far more rare than this meets the eye' .

I am focusing on *Brookside* because it has caught the imagination of both straight and lesbian/gay audiences, whereas other TV soaps and dramas have either sparked momentary interest or the lesbian content of the programmes themselves has been short-lived. One of the positive aspects of *Brookside*’s lesbian story is that it has never represented lesbian-themed stories solely for the benefit of a straight audience. It has been prepared to challenge heterosexist assumptions. As Mal Young, the soap’s producer, told me, *Brookside*’s not about making people feel comfortable.' Compare this with Emmersdale’s character, Zoe, who discovered her lesbianism in Summer 1993. After a couple of coming-out scenes and a visit to a gay club in Leeds, the scriptwriters seemed unable to do with what to do with her. There was little mention of Zoe’s sexuality again until November 1994. The newest lesbian plot, in *EastEnders*, has been significant in challenging the all-white representation of current TV lesbians, but hasn’t received as much enthralled attention as *Brookside*. In the mainstream press, *EastEnders* has been accused of "cosy" tactics, while the lesbian press has considered characters Della and Binnie "two-dimensional". *Brookside* has so far provided the longest and most consistent lesbian storyline in British TV drama.

**Images and words**

*Brookside*’s lesbian theme has developed in many directions, both on-and-off screen. One of the most significant of these was the publication of *The Journal of Beth Jordache* on 23 April 1994. It is around the character of Beth Jordache (played by Anna Friel) that the lesbian theme has been focused. The publication of the *Journal* invites the interesting question: What can be seen of Beth through her diary writings which isn’t available from the TV screen? And vice versa: what is shown of Beth on the TV screen which cannot be represented in diary form?

This raises questions about the ways in which different audiences construct readings of the lesbian storyline — who sees lesbians? when? and how? The quote, 'You never see lesbians', appears in *The Journal of Beth Jordache*. Interestingly, Beth’s comment refers specifically to the visibility of lesbians on television, and takes television to be an important cultural resource when wishing to develop one’s understanding of a range of subjects, including issues of sexuality. This is the context of Beth’s sentence: 'You’d have thought it would be easy to find out about theese days. I’ve always been sort of aware of it, but I don’t really know what being gay means. The only thing you are on the telly is a lot of camp girls pooving around playing hairdressers. It’s one of the rules. If a man’s a hairdresser, then he’s gay and so long behind you wonder he can hold the scissors. Either that, or he’s incredibly sensitive and dying of AIDS. You never see lesbians.'

That this comment forms part of Beth’s diary entry for 28 November 1993 has everything to do with issues of lesbian visibility in *Brookside* because at this point in the TV series there were few on-screen references to lesbianism.

**Intimate embraces**

What and how does a lesbian storyline become visible? For the tabloid press, the lesbian storyline really began in the week leading up to Christmas 1993 and seemed to receive confirmation only after the 14 January 1994 episode. In the Christmas Eve transmission Beth tells her friend, Margaret, that she loves her and attempts to kiss her, providing the first ‘lesbian kiss’ scenes.

What does it take for the mainstream press to see lesbians on TV? The second kiss screened on 14 January 1994, recirculated this time by Margaret, apparently marks the deciding factor. ‘It’s the Clencher’ according to that day’s *Daily Mirror* headline, printed alongside a photograph of Beth and Margaret’s kiss. The *Mirror’s* article opens with the lines: ‘Here is the picture that says it all, Beth Jordache loves Margaret Clement. And viewers will be in no doubt about it when the two girls have a close-encounter kissing scene on tonight’s episode’ (my emphasis). Without supporting picture evidence of a particular kind, an unamused female embrace or kiss, for example, it seems there is no lesbian story.

But in the fact such an intimate embrace had been screened on 19 and 22 November 1993. On both occasions, Beth and Margaret are shown in bed together in each other’s arms. They kiss and hug; they are depicted as ‘innocent’ friends free from the suggestion of lesbianism. This is how Mal Young represents those scenes: The girls went to bed in each other’s arms, and not one letter of complaint. Everyone said ‘Osgood scene. And then a month later we showed them back in bed together kissing and everyone said: Disgusting. You should be taken off the air.’ And I said, ‘What’s the difference? It’s exactly what they did a month ago. They kissed a month ago, but because we didn’t suggest any storyline you were quite happy.’ We wanted to put up people’s hyperactivity, and it kind of worked.

Now I want to turn to the 25 October 1993 episode, which I identify as a pivotal moment in the lesbian storyline. Beth tells on Margaret and immediately begins to talk about the book she is holding.

But I bought this over for you. I finished reading it on the way home.

Margaret’s is good isn’t it? Beth’s really bad. I’m so embarrassed. Can you believe it, I wanted crying on the bus. Some old woman asked if I was alright so told her my auntie had died. I don’t know why. Margaret takes the book, turns it over to read the back cover, and it is never mentioned again. This whole scene probably takes up less than a minute of screen time. It may not seem like much to get excited about, but it demands specialised knowledge on behalf of the viewer if the book exchange is to have any meaning other than an attempt to introduce a level of narrative realism. At no time is the title of the book or the author’s name visible. The model reader for this scene is someone who can recognise a book by its cover and come up with the *Virago* edition of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, and then go beyond this to interpret the book as a code word for ‘lesbian’.

According to Rebecca O’Rourke who has written extensively about *The Well of Loneliness* and its meaning for different readers, the painting by Givarc on the Virago cover is enough on its own to signal ‘lesbian’:

(i) shows two heads, cheek to cheek. The figures are androgynous women: short cropped hair, no make-up, noble features. This image represents lesbianism whereas [cover on different editions of *The Well*] represents women; a subtle yet easy division. It also represents women as lesbians, a way of understanding what most interpretations of the novel means: that Mary is as much a lesbian as Stephen.

(Could this possibly suggest that Margaret is as much a lesbian as Beth? I’m reading ahead here,
but it's worth a thought.) Beth adds her response to reading *The Well of Loneliness* to the many others documented throughout lesbian publications. It is a popular myth within lesbian culture that reading *The Well of Loneliness* features on 'a kind of checklist of things you do-as you're coming out'.

It is not necessary in terms of its narrative function that viewers recognise Beth's gift to Margaret as *The Well of Loneliness*, but it does offer some viewers a further interpretive device by which to measure the developing intimacy between the two young women at this stage in the TV narrative and in subsequent episodes. *The Well of Loneliness* features in an important episode for the strengthening of Beth and Margaret's friendship, for it is at this stage that Beth begins to talk to Margaret about her violent and sexually abusive father. The discussions about Beth's father are continued when Beth and Margaret are in bed together on 19 November. Beth shares more and tells Margaret that she was raped by her father when she was seventeen. Margaret is upset for Beth and hugs her, urging her not to talk any more about men because 'it's friends who count'.

Subsequently viewers were teased by a controversial heterosexual plot involving a form of love triangle between Beth, Margaret and their friend Keith. Heterosexual pairings are assumed and the possibility of same-sex desire is continually denied. Beth's behaviour around Keith and Margaret is interpreted by other characters, including Margaret herself, as a form of sexual jealousy; the only conceivable reason is that she must fancy Keith.

All this highlights the gaps between the TV narrative and the journal narrative and their possible effects on the TV viewer. One of the constraints of soap opera is that as it is based on the idea of community, the narrative has to be built around social exchange. What happens to one character is important primarily in terms of the effects it has on other characters, so an individual can only reveal their feelings if they share them in a social context. Soap opera doesn't allow introspection. You are not allowed inside a character's head, and rarely do you see through their eyes. This is where *The Journals* of Beth Jordache complement the experience of watching *Brookside*. In the *Journals* the lesbian story is available to all readers, and Beth's exploration of her sexuality is neatly detailed in a process.

While the TV narrative provokes confusion in the viewer, especially a viewer looking for the heterosexual story in the relationship between Beth, Margaret and Keith, the *Journals* simultaneously present Beth's own confusion about sexuality and relationships. The diary format allows Beth to discuss her feelings for earlier in the narrative than that represented on-screen in the social world of soap opera.

However, my pivotal moment involving *The Well of Loneliness* does not appear in Beth's diary. Instead, Beth describes how she called on Margaret merely to lend her a CD. Perhaps *The Well of Loneliness* becomes redundant here as a 'lesbian sign' because the diary reader has access to Beth's private thoughts. But when I questioned Mal Young about the book's absence he said that besides issues of copyright mentioning *The Well of Loneliness* would have been a distraction within Beth's story as most readers will have no knowledge of it. Although this omission priorities the experience of a straight reader, it is also encouraging that Mal Young takes very seriously reactions to *Brookside* in the lesbian and gay press, and has become more aware of lesbian and gay audiences through Beth's story. The publication of Beth's story in journal format provides a valuable resource for the young people who have identified with the character of Beth and written to the producer and to Anna Field. The *Journals* promote the possibility of lesbian existence, particularly for younger women, and Mal Young has already had an enquiry from a Theatre-in-Education company wishing to dramatise the *Journals* for discussion in schools.

**The impact of the on-screen kiss**

Of course, what the *Journals* cannot provide is a visual representation of lesbian desire. I have already suggested that the visual impact of the kiss scenes in the television narrative has been important for the mainstream recognition of a lesbian storyline, and that this has contributed in some part to the media's continued high level of interest in *Brookside's* lesbian themes. What I want to do, though, is deny the significance of these on-screen kisses for lesbian audiences. If heterosexual desire is shown, but lesbian desire remains taboo, heterosexual sexuality will continue to be normalised. The absence of lesbian desire conceals the fullness and reality of lesbian lives and can effectively make lesbians invisible by ignoring

lesbianism as a factor of a character's identity and by obscuring the cultural position of lesbians.

Articles about the representation of lesbian characters on American TV (currently more abundant than those from a British perspective) have criticised the way in which lesbian characters are not allowed to express sexual desire or passion. To be non-threatening to heterosexual screen characters or TV viewers, lesbian characters must not display lesbian desire. You may see lesbians on prime-time American TV, but you never see lesbian characters being sexual. The much-hyped 'lesbian kiss' on *Rosieane* wasn't really a kiss at all, and certainly didn't represent lesbian desire for this viewer. Even so, the American TV networks threatened to cut the episode. Such censorship of lesbian sexuality is relevant to my discussion of *Brookside* because Margaret and Beth's kiss was cut from the Saturday omnibus edition due to its earlier transmission time of 5.00pm and the alleged unsuitability of lesbian scenes for 'family audiences'. Ironically, this action may have helped TV producers to justify further representations of lesbian desire. Many viewers were prompted to contact Mal Young over this censorship, ensuring in 80 percent a viewer support in favour of the kiss being shown.

Sasha Torres suggests that 'TV's refusal to represent lesbian erotic life' has to do with one of the particular narrative roles constructed for lesbian characters. A lesbian character may be introduced as an example of 'otherness' which serves to keep interactions between the rest of the female characters free from any suggestion of lesbianism. If her erotic life and desire for another woman were to be represented, lesbian sexuality would no longer be contained and controllable. This point may explain the previous absence of lesbian issues in soap opera: it was, because of the crucial role of women issues that the representation of lesbian relationships is difficult... The representation of lesbian friendship through the presentation of a lesbian couple, could reverberate through the themes, calling attention to the reader's relationship between other women in the television narrative.

There has been no attempt in *Brookside* to limit lesbianism to the character of Beth Jordache, in fact quite the opposite. The subject of women's desire in general has been opened up for discussion, and in a way which challenges the dominant discourse of sexism and heterosexuality. *Brookside* has been prepared to eroticise female friendship, upsetting the heterosexist assumption that a character can be 'safely straight'. Rather than lesbianism being limited to one character, the visibility of Beth's sexuality through her relationships with Margaret and then Chris has led to the extension of the lesbian plot into other characters' lives. Outraged by her husband's homophobic remarks directed at Beth, Brookside's Jean Crobie began to re-live the love she had for a woman friend when she was eighteen.

I would like to suggest that *Brookside* 's ability to must lesbian desire has kept lesbian audiences focused on the character of Beth Jordache, whereas interest in *Emmerdale's* Zoe soon waned. While *EastEnders* introduced its own lesbian couple through characters Della and Binnie, they have not met with the same enthusiasm as Beth. Tilly Mackay (Diova August 1994) writes of Della and Binnie: 'there is no chemistry in their scenes together which are therefore hopeless unromantic', whereas 'there is a genuine emotional and sexual friction in Beth's "sex" scenes'.

**Endangered species?**

If it seems at the moment that every British soap (not yet Coronation Street) must have its own lesbian character, there is an accompanying awareness that these are only characters who may all too soon disappear from our TV screens. The contradiction between being seen and being heard, and between visibility and power have been set down by those who have shown their characterisation of lesbians and real lesbian lives. While current TV soap steers away from stereotypically negative representations of lesbians, the mainstream media's treatment of real-life lesbians tends to reinforce the notion that lesbians really are 'depressed'.

On 14 January 1994, Anna Frid and Nicola Stephenson (who played Margaret in *Brookside*) were interviewed on Channel 4's *The Word*. By this time, The Word had already had their own lesbian presenter, Huffy. But only fictional lesbians were allowed to perform as lesbians on the show. Through its treatment of Huffy, *The Word* effectively silenced lesbianism except in a fictional context. She was continually under mined by the other presenters, made to perform heterosexist stunts, and reportedly even banned from the studio so that she could not get too
The Journals of Beth Jordache adapted by Rachel Breureen (Hesperus 1994)

1 Rebecca O'Brien Reflecting on The Well of Loneliness ( Routledge 1989)

2 Christine Holmeland "When is a Lesbian Not a Lesbian?" The Lesbian Curriculum and the Mainstream Press (Hemisphere Books 1990)

3 Sandra Torres Television/ Feminism: Heartbeat and Prime Time Lesbian (The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader edited by Henry Abdo and et al. (Routledge 1997)


close' to fellow-presenter Dani Behr. Huffy's frustration was clear when on the final show in the 1993-94 season, she shouted 'Lesbian Power' over the closing credits. Huffy was axed from the show before its new series. By attempting to voice lesbian reality, she was finally denied both power and visibility.

When well-known TV personality, Sandi Toksvig, came out not only as a lesbian but also as an HIV-positive woman, the TV industry worked to keep her as their toast for a prestigious fundraising event. Lesbian 'celebrities' are not celebrated in mainstream media, and certainly not if children are involved. The high-glory popularity of 'Lesbian Chic' comes into view only when women are considered to be playing a part and to look the part. In the mainstream press, 'chic' often means 'an acceptable performance of femininity'. Homophobic abuse of head nurse Jean Brown condemned her for her 'disfigured' mind and clodshodding boots, her 'stubborn look', and a haircut considered too short.

Brookside's lesbian storyline isn't merely a reaction to the 'lesbian chic' craze; it is a central text in the current cultural debates about lesbian visibility and lesbian representability. As lesbian characters explode onto the TV screen and 'Lesbian Chic' stories hit the headlines, it becomes imperative to question the gap between visibility and empowerment.

In her recent study of contemporary lesbian writing, which is aimed at a Lesbian Studies/ Women's Studies readership, Paulina Palma asks whether or not Lesbian Studies are best pursued in the context of feminism, or if such a frame is restrictive. In another recent book of contemporary lesbian literary and cultural readings, Sally Murr addresses, with Venn diagrams, a similar question of the space or context occupied by Lesbian Studies, this time as opposed to Women's Studies and to what she calls Gay Studies. Meanwhile, in a recent journal article, Shela Jeffreys asserts that lesbian feminism has been 'disappeared' by both 'traditional' Women's Studies and by the new 'Queer' Lesbian and Gay Studies. Certain points or questions occur to me as I read all of their comments: the first is that in many respects this question about academic or theoretical debates parallels what have also been 'practical' deliberations about the space(s) of lesbian activism, which some rather tired-looking lesbians used to solve by 'being everywhere'.

The second question and the main area under discussion in this article is, what is happening first to the context and then to the context of Lesbian Studies, given some of the recent developments? In the present environment, characterised by a flurry of conferences and publications marketed as 'Queer', an atmosphere of veritable 'theorisation' on this topic exists (a term to describe the end-product of the institutional valorisation and encouragement of 'Theory' in the humanities). Will 'Lesbian Studies', with its 'cumbersome' feminist baggage and/or separatist connotations, be swept away as a rather passé label in this supposed new age of perversity and queerness, along with the broad spectrum of political ideas or commitments which used to be part of it?

How did we get queer?

'Queer', like many umbrella terms, has come to mean different things to different groups. However, as a term applied to theoretical work in Lesbian and Gay Studies it is generally denotes the application of poststructuralist and postmodern ideas to interdisciplinary studies of the historical formations of lesbianism and homosexuality, and of the relationship between these formations and those of heterosexuality. It implies a shift from the consideration of
lesbians and homosexuality as discrete identities to one of homosexualities as kinds of discursive construct. 'Queer' theorists also often advocate the disruption or destruction of traditional categories of sex and gender. Of the two books I mentioned above, both appear to refuse the 'Queer' label. Sally Munt's edited study, *New Lesbianism*, is slightly pre-'Queer Theory', so to speak, since the essays it assembles with their main British focus appear to have been written between 1990 and 1991. Some of the essays could, however, be retrospectively labelled 'Queer' in focus and outlook, being firmly in the tradition of lesbian writing augured by *Feminist Review*'s Spring 1990 *Perverse Politics* issue. On the other hand, Paulina Palmer's book, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, published in 1993, was in time for the British departure of the 'Queer Theory' bandwagon (for example, Cherry Smith's *Lesbians Talk Queer Notes*) appears in Palmer's bibliography. She, however, prefers to stand on the sidelines and simply survey 'Queer' politics and theory in her attempt to contextualise key lesbian works along with key political events and movements. I shall summarise her version of the emergence of these 'Queer' discourses as a preface to my own discussion.

Palmer sites her account of these developments in part of a chapter on 1980s theory and politics entitled 'Libertarian and poststructuralist approaches'. This follows on from a critical discussion of what she calls, following Faderman, the lesbian 'sexual radicals', the increasing influence of a psychoanalytic account of lesbian desire, and the publication of such mixed lesbian/heterosexual women's writings on sexuality as *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, Pleasure and Danger* and the 1981 edition of the *American Journal, Heresies*. After the (SM, 'Butch/Penny', pornography) 'Sex Waxes', in Palmer's account, with the lines clearly drawn between lesbian feminists and sexual radicals, came further division over the issue of bisexuality before the late 1980s homophobic backlash — in Britain, in the form of Section 28 — led to a greater willingness among many lesbians to work alongside gay men. The perceived failure of conventional campaigning methods and of what became known as 'identity' or 'Affirmation' politics resulted in many lesbians and gays turning not only towards what were seen as more radical forms of direct action aimed at confrontation with the state, particularly as a means of responding to the AIDS crisis, but also towards new kinds of identity politics which were more welcoming of bisexuality, for example, as well as other varieties of self-defined 'sexual minorities'. Thus, argues Palmer, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the migration of many lesbians away from feminism, influenced by, or attracted to, libertarian attitudes towards a participation in the new mixed political movements: in the USA, *Queer Nation* and *ACT UP*, in Britain, *ACT UP* and OutRage (now with its new offshoot, the Lesbian Avenger). She does point out that many of the forms of direct action used by these groups resemble the activities of the early WLM. Palmer also notes, without really attempting an explanation — it seems to be, after all, simply the culminating point in all this political activity — the emergence of Lesbian and Gay Studies courses in universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With that, the reader as far as acknowledging the existence of an entity called 'Queer Theory', she does point out the increasing influence in academic and publishing circles of the poststructuralist perspectives and modes of thought, and names theorists (Butler, Firey) that others have come to designate as 'Queer'.

Palmer's account is, on the whole, reasonably well-documented and extremely valuable for the way in which it attempts to contextualise politics (including discussion of her own political experiences in a British lesbian feminist context) alongside theoretical considerations and lesbian creative writing. However, there is one issue concerning her contextualisation of recent lesbian theory that I feel is worth taking a closer look at. As I have mentioned, Palmer offers no real opinion as to why Lesbian Studies and Gay Studies emerged in the late 1980s as separate disciplines, or why poststructuralist approaches have become in the 1990s the most highly valorised form of theorising. This is after all a rather paradoxical, if not totally contradictory development in many ways: 'Queer' theorists have been able to establish their own academic territory, creating their own identity as a group, even as they deconstruct away the notions and categories involved in such a move.

**Consuming identities**

Why did this happen? Why did these discursive and institutional spaces open up, and why was it that a particular kind of theory generally filled them up? In Britain, at least, the Thatcherite 1980s with the racist, misogynist and homophobically bashed TLC of the GLC and 'Loony Left' and, in particular 1988 with the passing of Section 28, saw unprecedented amounts of publicity in all areas of the media on the subjects of homosexuality and lesbianism which were both highly negative and positive. This topically when taken with the mass mobilisations of lesbians and gay men and their sympathisers against what was originally Clause 28, and the third of this temporary community for knowledge, information or 'images' of gay and lesbian identities provided a ready market for publishers, part of which was an academic market.

In the introduction to her book, Sally Munt also briefly examines this question and argues that it was the forging of these social movements in the late 1980s precisely within a consumerist aesthetic which paved the way for a mini-boom, for example, in the publication of lesbian-authored texts about lesbian writing. She writes: 'A postmodern culture has seen the development of reading communities with purchasing power, which publishers have rightly perceived as potential micro-markets' (1992, p.XVI). My own memory is that at this time identity politics did indeed fuse with this kind of niche-marketing, so that being lesbian or gay was seen to be partly achieved by buying the right books, wearing the T-shirt (or the 501s) or by adopting the 0898 number. Clearly, neither the causes nor the effects of these developments are only aesthetic; they are part of a wider social, economic and cultural consumerist shift.

This may well answer certain questions about demand, but what of the supply side? Courses, publications or conferences do not just happen without teachers, authors and organisers, and in this case, all with particular identifications. Obviously, there were lesbian and gay-identified academics and theorists before Section 28. Also, many women and men academics and theorists, both during and after this particular struggle, came out or identified as lesbian or gay, or bisexual. Many of the campaign activists have got jobs as academics. Some of them will have been 'self-consciously moving out of one political location into another, recognising the contextual imperative' (p.XVI), as Sally Munt describes it. In other words they have perhaps been wanting to 'do something' about their identification in their current context, although the pressures on them not to do so would vary according to their job status, ...
gender, class and ethnic background, amongst other factors. Some of this is also true of the earlier development of academic feminism in response to the struggles of the Women's movement, of course. Mintz writes that the way in which Lesbian and Gay Studies is being seen in some North American and British universities, as now occupying the radical space which was once feminism, is disturbing in that it has displaced feminism as something more academically conventional. On an anecdotal level, we may well agree with her, and some of us, for example, Sheila Jeffreys in her recent article, may suspect that it is all down to dubious alliances with gay men who have not always been the best friends of feminism. But would we be misplacing our blame?

One of the insights from the work of Michel Foucault, and others within certain ‘Queer’ theorist, is that power has not operated primarily by denying sexual expression but by creating the forms that modern sexuality takes; individuals are categorised and attached to their identities. Similarly, power has not always denied radical political or social expression, for, as John Chappatte writes, ‘special’ fields of knowledge are sometimes created, such as Gay Studies, in attempts by the academy to manage diversity, or as Muste puts it, this is the way that the establishment assimilates in order to deradicalise. I would add that it is in this very way that institutions mask the very conflicts which constitute them. Even if, however, the establishment does, once in a while, allow the creation of carefully managed spaces, which it further deradicalises by marginalising them, surely it doesn’t always dictate the kind of theory that they must use?

**Catching theorists**

I feel that a possible key here lies in the term that I mentioned at the beginning of my discussion: ‘theoretist’, the current valorisation (and outsourcing) of theory. ‘Queer Theory’, whilst in itself, can hardly be said to have much affected the curriculum in either British or North American universities, has certain antecedents in common with other supposedly radically-oriented theories and practices, such as deconstruction, or with ‘Theory’ itself, that problematic umbrella term under which are grouped various poststructural and postmodern approaches to particular areas of knowledge. Such perspectives have in certain circles, most notably in academic literary and Cultural Studies, achieved a critical hegemony. Patrick Brantlinger, in his discussion of ‘theoretise’ in Cultural Studies, outlines three possible causes for the proliferation of ‘Theory’ from the 1960s onwards: the existence in the academy of political aspirations thwarted on the ‘outside’, authentic, progressive movements of knowledge; and criticist responses to both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ marketing considerations (consumersmism at work again?). He sees these causes not as alternatives but most likely as political, economic and cultural factors that have operated simultaneously. I find this a very convincing argument when discussing not only ‘Queer’ and Lesbian and Gay theory, but also some feminist theorising now and in the past.

If ‘theoretise’ might lend various forms of theorising about sexuality and gender, perhaps now is the time to turn to an examination of some specifically Lesbian examples of ‘Queer Theory’ itself in order to address some of the other questions I posed in my introduction. Interestingly, as I have argued so far, amongst other considerations, the ‘outside’ of politics has a good deal to do with the ‘inside’ of theory, Terese de Lauretis in her introduction to the 1991 ‘Queer Theory’ issue of *difference: a journal of feminist cultural studies* showcases a straightforward connection between ‘Queer’ activism and theory. De Lauretis argues that ‘Queer Theory’, based as it is for her on the deconstruction of the binary categories underpinning the formation of gender and sexual subjectivities, is often too radical for an activism which sometimes just isn’t queer enough, frequently recreating, despite its best intentions and efforts, the identity politics it aims to transcend. Judith Butler, in a chapter from her 1993 book, * Bodies that Matter*, entitled ‘Critically Queer’, argues that while in some contexts the term, ‘Queer’ appeals to a younger generation attempting to resist the reformist politics sometimes signified by ‘Lesbian and Gay’, this is the same predominantly white movement ‘that has not fully addressed the way in which “queer” plays — or fails to play with non-white communities’ (p 228), my emphasis; it is interesting to see how Butler portrays racism as such a pluralist entity, even as she critiques ‘Queer’ for failing to take it seriously, here. She also argues that there is a similar issue at stake along gender lines: ‘whereas in some instances (the term “Queer”) has mobilised a lesbian activism, in others the term represents a false unity of women and men’ (p 228).

While I note that this account sounds suspiciously like some past phases of lesbian gay activism, it is interesting that Butler here footnotes Cherry Smith’s book, *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*, as her example of Lesbian activism being mobilised by the term ‘Queer’. Smith’s book, which is clearly an artefact of ‘Queer Politics’ based as it is on fragmented interviews with activists and critics of the movement, is also a self-conscious piece of ‘Queer Theory’ (in the manner of certain pieces of feminist theory), an attempt at a kind of *écriture queer*. Many (lesbian) feminists would

built at the assertion of a connection between ‘Queer politics’ and feminism, with the proliferation of references to an heroic lesbian sexual outlawism pitted against comments about the past ‘silencing of anything but “right on” forms of sexual expression’ (p 37), but this is precisely the connection Cherry Smith invokes when she states in her introduction that ‘[t]he book’ is situated firmly within feminism and queer politics, while expressing ambivalences towards both’ (p 12).

For ‘ambivalences toward feminism’ read code for a feministic ethics set up as the bad, prudish mother in opposition to her renegade, sexual daughters, to paraphrase Arlene Stein’s account in her collection of essays entitled in the US, *Sisters, Sexsperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation*. While this current of thought is not an essential component of all ‘Queer Theory’ it does crop up in many ‘Queer’ books in some of the old, familiar guises, sometimes, as a romantic attachment to a particular version of ‘transgressive’ lesbian sexual practice, or as an idealisation of other practices such as lesbian ‘butch/femme’ role-playing with little or no reference to historical or other contextually specific ways of interpreting these practices.

**High (Queer) Theory**

Judith Butler is an interesting theorist in this regard. Her work, like that of Diana Pass, falls into what might be described as ‘High Queer Theory’ (a false binary category, of course...), in other words, work being informed by feminine philosophy, as well as by many other areas of theory in the humanities. Paulina Palmer, in her survey of contemporary lesbian theory analyses the questions which Butler addresses while disliking the ‘estreric tone and elitist attitude’ (p 30) associated with her work. While Butler herself states that she is working within a
feminist tradition, the poststructuralist framework of her analyses means that she treats 'woman' and 'lesbian' as very unstable categories indeed, which engenders difficulties for a (lesbian) feminist politics. What happens to your politics when your 'identity' category has been deconstructed out of 'false' existence. Butler discusses this hypothesis in her essay 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', which opens the 1991 collection of mixed lesbian/gay 'Queer Theory' edited by Diana Pan, InsideOut.

Here, she summarises the above problem: it is one thing to be eradred by discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as an 'altering facebook'. Hence, there is a political imperative to render lesbianism visible, but how is that to be done outside or through existing regulatory regimes? (p.20)

Butler resorts in this essay to the defence of these 'necessary errors' or 'category mistakes' of sexual identity categories in the face of the political imperative of fighting homophobia and the oppression of women.

Several things are striking to me about Butler's brand of 'Queer' discourse: it is less confrontational about the whole spectrum of its acknowledged feminist and lesbian antecedents without falling into an apologetic stance. It also tries to stray less from other attempts at 'Queer' theory into the realm of nostalgia for a mythical, pre-feminist, lesbian past when supposedly we could dress how we liked and do what we wanted within our own outlaw culture. The only time that Butler seems to wander into this area is when she outlines her theories that all gender is performance and that there are no gender 'originals' for which drag performances and lesbian butch/femme 'stylistics' are 'copies'. Her version of butch/femme relationships in Gender Trouble is drawn from Moraga and Hollihag's account in Desire and it inherits many of their attitudes.

In some respects, 'Queer' is posing no new dilemmas for academic, lesbian-feminist theorising, which is still going on in almost all the old spaces, within Women's Studies and Lesbian/Gay/Queer studies. This is not to say that it poses no dilemmas at all, it's just that we've met them before. For example, when Chery Smyth launches an attack in her book on 'misplaced feminist morality' and then another on the sexism of 'Queer' homo, she clearly wants to have her cake and eat it too. The old-fashioned kind of 'sex radical' similarly never could jettison completely the 'proliferous mother' of feminism, either. This is the paradox that some 'Queer' theorists describe as 'dropping the law', and the precursors of a good deal of lesbian 'Queer' criticism are the earlier attempts at sex-radical feminism (quite often the theorists involved are one and the same), and both forms of criticism have been affected with this anxiety about ethics, or values. It seems that it can never be quite 'queer' (i.e. radical) enough just to be lesbian. 'Queer', and publishing in academia, without some larger political, ethical (and institutional?) framework, most usefully provided by feminism.

What has changed in the last seven or eight years is that the proliferation of published academic work on the subject of lesbian/bi sexual identities and identifications which has taken place has generally made use of a particular group of poststructuralist theories which have been valorised over and others by the academy. I have attempted to trace at least a slightly more compelling account of how this 'Queer Theorisation' came to pass, by arguing that the late 1980s lesbian and gay movements forged their identities almost as much through consumerism as through political activism. After the perceived 'failure' of lesbian gay movements to effect real political change outside the academy, what were genuine progressive movements of knowledge created by a growing number of lesbian/gay/bisexual-identified academics on the inside were co-opted by difficult-to-avoid careerist responses to both the external and internal marketing considerations. So, while it seems to me that academic lesbian feminism has nothing to fear from the more historically specific accounts of the formations of 'homosexualities' or from the more materialist forms of 'Queer' cultural criticism, the real danger lies in oppositional narratives which can always be contested but in the 'theorisation', in the pressures and demands of careerism and consumerism. While this co-opted version of education and academic publishing is allowed to predominate, we should continue to be aware that the spaces that (lesbian) feminists and other progressive political movements have fought for in academia, from which some of us are able to speak, would not necessarily survive any changes in the 'market' to which we are supposed to respond.

Patrick Beattie:  'Crane's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America' (Routledge 1990)
Judith Butler: Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge 1990)
Judith Butler: Bodies that matter: on the discriminator limits of sex (Routledge 1993)
Judith Butler: Feminism and Gender Insubordination, see Pan, ed. below. pp.13-31
Feminism Review No 34 Spring 1998, 'Provene Politics: Lesbian Insani'
Diana Pan, ed. InsideOut: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories (Routledge 1991)
Herstory 12 34 81
Amber Hollibaugh and Chemie Monga: What we've loin' around in bed with social silencea in feminism see Saitto et al, eds. below, pp.404-414

Sally Mott, ed. New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings (Harvester 1992)
Paulina Palm: Contemporary Lesbian Writing: Dreams, Desire, Difference (Open University Press 1993)
Chery Smyth: Lesbian Talk Queer Nations (Scarlet Press 1992)
Aas Bax: Lovers, Desires, Seperates, Queers: beyond the Lesbian Nation (Plinto/Penguin Books 1993)
Carol Vance, ed. Pleasures and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality (Routledge 1984)
Stuck in the Middle

It used to be assumed that feminist theory and practice informed each other. Liz Kelly addresses the growing divide between the two and reasserts the need for feminist praxis.

One of the central tenets of feminist thought was the link between theory and practice, but this seems to have fallen into something of vacuum, with most commentators stressing the sister principle of the personal is political as the foundation of second wave feminism. This short ‘think piece’ is an exploration of the consequences of this, and a plea for a rekindling of our desire to create feminist praxis (an old fashioned, and now unpopular, term meaning the ongoing linkage between theory and practice).

Several radical feminists have noted the way in which the feminist practice of consciousness raising has been re-defined (see for example Sophie Laws, 1990). In its original conception women met in groups to share their personal experience of oppression. This sharing of experience was not the primary purpose of cr, although this is how it is most commonly understood today. It was a first step. The second was to analyse our experiences, through making sense of our lives and asking ‘why’, women aimed to better understand what needed to change. The third step was to work together to create change. The cr groups I belonged to in Norwich in the mid 1970s were also groups of women I did activism with. We sometimes worked in the ‘opposite’ way, beginning with a written piece of ‘theory’ and exploring how far it reflected our experience helped us make sense of it.

But this passion (and we were passionate about it, and I still am) to understand, to make sense of women’s lives seems far less evident today. Whilst there are many factors involved in this shift, the one I want to explore is the increasing separation of theory and practice in British feminism, which undoubtedly has parallels in other contexts. What I encounter far too frequently these days is either absolute difficulty feminist theory, which has minimal connection to the complexity and messiness of everyday life, or immediate personal accounts, awe-struck in the meanness of one’s life with little or no reflection, self-criticism or awareness of other women’s realities.

The last decade has been one in which British feminists have come to see themselves as increasingly beleaguered, witness the constant references to ‘backlash’ in the written and spoken word. A sense of threat and loss pervades many discussions, and such a pessimistic climate tends to produce a defensive clinging onto old certainties, or alternatively an abandonment of them as elements from a previous idealistic, but no longer relevant, time. These distinct responses often result in our fighting each other rather than the institutions and practices which reproduce women’s oppression. What is seldom evident these days is women seriously discussing a vision of a different world, a sense of what we might be fighting/struggling for.

Whose experience?

Beginning from one’s own experience was a fundamental challenge to traditional politics — be it right, liberal, or left. Most political theories were based on men’s experiences and analyses of the world, and we had the temerity to place ourselves at the centre. The majority of left politics 25 years ago consisted of either arid arguments about the “true” meaning of parts of texts, conducted in a style and language which, for those new to the ideas, were alienating and frequently incomprehensible or lectures by comrades who had studied something in depth. Telling each other about aspects of our lives, and trying to develop understanding and explanation from there, created a political process which was accessible and intentionally involving of everyone. We shifted the terms of debate from the literary, the grand scale of production, false consciousness and class struggle to housework, patriarchy, sexuality and women’s liberation, and in the process created both a new language and a new political approach. The extent of the shift is consciousness from that early period are easy to forget, and I try to keep vivid my mid-70s memories of bemused (and frequently hostile) responses to political meetings on motherhood, housework and violence.

But we rapidly became aware of the limits of personal experience, when all, or the majority of the persons involved were white, heterosexual, educationally privileged women. Challenges from within, and outside, the WLM made it clear that experience had to be more inclusive. Some cr groups, and other kinds of women’s groups did include women with different experiences, but many did not. One outcome of this process has been identity politics, in which experience of a particular form of oppression has come to be defined as a politics in itself. Some forms of identity politics appear to create a personal investment in maintaining and even celebrating one’s oppression credentials rather than a political movement to end the oppression.

Within cr, and outside it, it also became clear that ‘experience’ itself was complicated — it was not some essential unchanging truth, but many, and even at times contradictory. How I’ve always understood feminism is as a tool for making sense of both individual lives, and the context in which they occur. Where what already existed did not enable ‘sense making’ then we needed to develop theory and concepts which did. Some of the most exciting feminist work begins from an issue, or question, we have not yet addressed and builds a feminist analysis through using old and new insights. But the failure of what already existed to provide women with immediate answers/explanations increasingly led many to look outside — be it to other theories like psychoanalysis or post-structuralism or to other practices such as therapy.

These shifts in how we think about experience have resulted in the separation of theoretical and personal approaches to experience; the theoretical approaches using women’s lives (if at all) merely as illustrations of the theory, and personal accounts being presented without wider contexts in which they are located.

Theory for its own sake

There was a time when the books/articles which moved women — be it in anger, action or heated discussion were shared inside and outside the academy. We might have taken different things from them, even understood them in different ways, but it was possible to discuss the ideas
within them in various contexts. This is rarely the case today. Too many of the theorists who currently excel in academic feminist debate are complex and inaccessible ones which few outside those circles would know about, let alone understand.

Some of the issues we are grappling with now are complex, but nonetheless it is possible to say difficult things in accessible ways. However, women have no wish to do this. One writes with an audience in mind. It is more than obvious that some audiences in mind are other academics, men and women, rather than the wider audience of feminists. Some feminist academics resolve this dilemma by self-consciously writing for different audiences, but I still wonder whose game is being played here. One of the very odd things about academics is that when academics become 'successful' — by promotion to the status of professor and particularly through popularity as a columnist, broadcaster or media 'expert' they begin to speak and write much more simply, and accessibly. How much of this convoluted language and argument is simply a claim to the status of academic/intellectual, which once that is conferred, can be shed?

'Theoretical theory' — theory for its own sake — is the opposite of the 'useful knowledge' feminist academics and researchers set themselves the goal of creating, and as such it serves as confirmation of the justness of an anti-intellectualism which has always had some support in British feminist politics. For women who are excluded by complex and inaccessible theory what is available to them are old certainties, approaches and analyses which made sense, even if they can't fully encompass changed times.

Much recent feminist academic theory is either deeply pessimistic about the possibility of an inclusive feminism, or oddly celebratory about the triumphs of gender identity. Little engages directly with the changed and unchanged material conditions of women's lives. Pessimistic feminist theory has begun to paralyse in the conceptual impossibility of holding at the same moment a range of oppressions without prioritising one. But what may be conceptually difficult in theory is developing in practice. Local, nation-based and international feminist networks and coalitions and some feminist research projects are finding ways of practising inclusive feminist politics. These realities always occur within the context of the particular issue. Through working together to create feminist social change, women are finding ways of working with similarity and difference in the same time. The more isolated and unaware feminist theoreticians become from feminist activism the more they are disconnected from the source which would encourage and enable them to resolve some of the theoretical knots.

Whilst 'theoretical theory' angers me, as I so too does slowness of theoretical concepts. One of the most important things feminism has done, and must continue to do, is to create new language and meanings which provide women with ways of naming and understanding their own experience. The redeffinition of 'the personal is political' from its original meaning that personal life could be analysed and understood, not to mention transformed, through politics in its current common use as 'one's personal life simply is political' is one example. The way many of us thinkingly, and not ironically, use 'pc' as common currency, when it carries underneath it a deep hostility and derision for our attempts to change language and meaning is another. It was our experience of language as a form of power — the power to name and define — which made it such a key issue from the beginning of this wave of feminism. We didn't learn linguistic or semiotic theory to understand how basic and fundamental an issue this was. It still is. We do our movement, and the constant and costly challenges and struggles countless women engaged in to create changes, an injustice when we abandon this commitment.

Activism in a vacuum

The inaccessibility of much academic feminist theory has thus far only referred to 'anti-intellectualism' amongst activists and deepened the divide between feminist activists and academics (although some of us do attempt to combine the two). It is one thing to want accessible theory, it is another altogether to resist it in any form at all. Theory and concepts are frameworks which enable us to make sense of the world; without them there can be no movement for women's liberation, for the idea/ vision is itself a concept which arises out of analysis of women's oppression. We all need to be able to analyse events, to understand how they fit into a broader picture. This is in fact the principle underpinning feminist services such as refugees and rape crisis lines. We sought not just to provide 'victim support' but to offer women different ways of making sense of their experiences: feminist ways, which drew on feminist theory.

When there was more connection between feminist theory and practice, women used to bring new insights to their support and campaigning work. This is far less likely today, creating a reliance on established ideas, and a weak basis on which to respond to new developments. One consequence has been that simplistic concepts are adopted to take the place of political analysis and understanding, and here too women have sought out non-feminist sources, such as traditional counselling methods or 12 step models.

The most obvious example of this in recent years is the overused concept of 'backlash', producing a pessimism of action paralleling the pessimism in theory I mentioned earlier. I don't think backlash is a particularly useful concept since it implies an awful and unique phenomenon, but more importantly it serves to substitute for a political analysis. If we take seriously the implications of fighting for women's liberation then resistance to this by men is inevitable. A heightened intensity of resistance could be understood as a response to the success of feminism, which reveals to us some of the faults lines in patriarchal power. Rather than making depressed references to 'the backlash' we ought to be asking why this resistance at this time, in this form, about this issue. The result would be that we could understand the current situation enough to be able to adapt our own strategies and arguments: a position from which we can continue to act, rather than feel defeated.

A good illustration of what I mean is so-called 'False Memory Syndrome' (FMS) — a fictional syndrome created by groups of parents (predominantly fathers) who have been (they claim, falsely) accused of sexual abuse by their adult children (usually daughters). This public condemnation of truth has been gloriously publicised by the media. Most women working in activist groups supporting women who have been abused have been shocked, disturbed and angered by the analysis of 'why now' and 'why in this form' has been limited to assertions of 'backlash'. In the Rape Crisis group I belong to an attempt to discuss 'why' and 'what is going on' was responded to extremely defensively by some women. But without this 'sense making' process we have very little to say, and no way of entering the public debate other than for individuals to assert that their accounts of abuse are true.

These are a few of the issues I think we needed, and still need, to discuss in relation to this issue:

• That women and children's accounts have been, and will continue to be contested, because breaking that silence, naming men as abusers is a profound challenge to their power, status and safety in the world.

• As Louise Armstrong has pointed out (T&G, 21), at least in the US — where FMS originated — an incest industry has emerged, with countless books and therapies being offered to women as routes to 'recovery'. It is possible that within this 'circuit' there are some charlatans, or even unprofessional individuals who take advantage of vulnerable and distressed women. I do not think that is inconceivable that some women may have been encouraged, even coerced by a powerful therapist to think that they have been abused when they have no memories of it. Feminists have always had a healthy scepticism of therapy, have challenged the abuse of power by therapists. It is dangerous to abandon that caution.

• However, women who approach rape crisis and other organisations for support have often been taken by their accounts of abuse, or begun to remember it themselves. One common response where memories are
just emerging is to for the woman to ask us to tell her they are not real. Louise Armstrong points out in her new book (1994) that FMS has emerged at the historical point where a relatively large number of adult women decided to use their absences for financial damages. In other words when women were just talking to each other there was little threat to men as individuals or a group, but once numbers of women chose to call them to account in ways that might hurt them, financially and in terms of their public reputation, a different response emerged.

Louise Armstrong argues that the movement of survivors to use their absences was a "wrong" move in this particular political struggle, since it individualises the issue and requires women to prove and display their damage in public. Another reading is that something like FMS only becomes necessary when power is perceived to be in jeopardy. The choice need not be either suing for damages or collective resistance. It is possible to envisage a co-ordinated calling to account, which would be promised on arguing for common levels of compensation (thus eliminating having to show you are "more" hurt than others) with a proportion going to the individual and a proportion to support services, prevention or campaigning groups. Creating this kind of movement, however, requires an analysis of what the potential losses and gains of particular strategies are, and how we could minimise one and maximise the other. That in turn demands that we value and develop tools through which we can create feminist praxis.

The way we were?

'Second wave' feminism has a quarter of a century history. Depending on how you measure 'success', much or very little has changed. We have not achieved women's liberation, but women's consciousness across the globe has shifted in vast and ever increasing ways. In that period new issues and concerns have emerged, and indeed we have come to understand that every issue is a women's issue. What we do far less of is discuss in open and respectful ways the multitude of ways in which women are still struggling to create feminist ways of thinking, working and living. There are common


drums and contradictions in trying to create alternatives in the eye of a storm, we sometimes fall short of our best intentions and aspirations.

What we need more of is neither theoretical nor personal accounts, but honest and critical reflections from the experience of working in women's groups, in coalitions — accounts which are attempts to make sense of the tensions, dilemmas, attempted solutions, unresolved issues. We all know that there are recurring themes which tear women's groups, and even friendship networks apart. Beginning to record and make sense of what is going on, and why, can involve women on the outside and the inside of groups working together to explore what they can bring to this "sense making" process.

The feminist organisations which I know still try to combine theory and practice are all involved in campaigning. Is it in fact the case that it is only through attempts to understand more fully and then act to change things — the purpose of praxis as it was originally defined — that theory and practice can be closely connected?

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**One Hell of a Trip**

We reprint the conclusion to Louise Armstrong's new book Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics, her personal account and analysis of fifteen years of struggles around the reality and meaning of widespread sexual abuse of children.

What strikes me most about my review of this issue is how effective fifteen years of diversion and newspaper have been. How odd it is to think that what the evidence shows is due to the thoroughly founded, the core around which it was the case that it is only through attempts to understand more fully and then act to change things — the purpose of praxis as it was originally defined — that theory and practice can be closely connected?—

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*One Hell of a Trip* by Louise Armstrong (Trouble & Strife, 1995)

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*Surviving the Loo: The Politics of Menstruation* (MacMillan, 1990)
having this happen. We have made sexual and physical assault on the victim's (questioning) design, rather than acknowledging that it is to lack that any woman owes escaping such an encounter (thus shifting those issues to allow focus on her vulnerability).

There has been money to be made from this. And we have gone to all lengths to avoid knowing that this lesson in permitted rage against women as wives and mothers leads to the likelihood that men will continue to express anger at women through aggressions against their own children. (What else do silly excuses for paternal child-rape like the wife not putting out enough or her being ill imply?)

Experts skilled in designating language to assist this knowledge-avoidance have been well compensated.

The issue of incest as it pertains to children now has been chopped free of the issue as it pertains to adult women whose violation was in the past. And even within the subset of children's issues, areas of specialization are separated from one another. Thus, when I went looking into the reality for kids of what intervention meant, I found myself in a separate universe, child-welfar. Here, an entirely different set of experts holds sway, and a different set of measurements. And I found myself all alone but in asking what it was that reality happened to the young victims of incest who had done what we had suggested they do: tell.

Then, as I discovered how quickly children identified as sexually abused became targets for mental health labelling and "special need" designations, searching for that reality in terms of children's lives took me into a separate world — that of children in institutions labelled psychiatric or therapeutic. Here, again, yet another set of experts was dominant, and here yet again I was all but alone in inquiring specifically about the path designated for young incest victims. Child advocates' estimates of how many children in these psychiatric institutions were in fact incest victims ranged from 'a great many' to a firm 75 percent.

It would be natural to believe that these children had been so psychologically devastated by their violation that they "needed" to be in such places — subjected to regimentation, to psychotropic medications, to restraints, and to isolation. That, however, did not prove to be at all true.

Rather, other things entirely were operating, distorting these children's (questioning) design, rather than acknowledging that it is to lack that any woman owes escaping such an encounter (thus shifting those issues to allow focus on her vulnerability). Once identified as an incest victim, the child was under surveillance for symptoms, and even normal responses to childhood upheaval were taken to be clinical symptoms that inhere to some individual child's disease. ( Ironically, dizzyingly, this exactly mirrored the search among adults who shared symptoms for a past that included incest.)

For another, the child protection intervention system often had nowhere else to put the kids down. Facilities designated 'therapeutic' were simply nowhere. For yet a third, during the 1980s kids were becoming the cash cow of institutional psychiatry. There was an explosion of private inpatient psychiatric facilities specializing in kids. Again, as this was reflected in the world of adults as well, as more and more private psychiatric institutions offered specialized treatment programs for the population of adult female problems said to result from incest... During the 1980s, the range of possible disorders in children expanded to include even Arithmetic Disorder, alongside all manner of conduct and behavioral disorders. (And during the 1980s, the number of disorders to be searched out in adult women multiplied as well.)

Identified as individual children's mental health problems, incest had enormous consequences for children — well beyond the rape itself. Yet to view those consequences meant entering different arenas, and so they tended to remain unseen by those specifically concerned with policy on incest, and by the general public as well.

The social value for achieving all this recovery for the status quo has been the therapeutic ideology — which has gone all but unchallenged. There is no question that institutionalization and an understanding outside presence offer some individual children and women benefit. Nor is there any question that change in the future cannot mean ignoring those trapped in the present. But the dominant emphasis on the language of pathology, treatment, and therapy as the primary social responses, to incest, actually isolates and marginalizes victims — even while announcing that 'you are not alone'.

It is an emphasis on pacification, on deflecting attention from all larger social meaning. A state of affairs that, even this has had its own side effects greater than what the backlash can bear — and the backlash activists have reared up and raised fists, and rallied against overzealous feminists engaged in a 'lifestyle vendetta', a campaign of vengeance that will involve the destruction of every man who has the misfortune to cross their path and whom they have an opportunity to destroy. Encouraging women to regress and obse is nothing but sexist. Indeed, the dominance of this ideology is counterfeminist and anything but radical. But given the emotional plane on which the issue has come to rest, accuracy here is not required — any more than it was during the communist McCarthy days to which the backlash spokespersons so often refer. Compared with the charge of "man-hating", woman-hating has never had much cachet.

The confusion generated by talking about the 'crime of incest', while treating it as a psychological matter, has left the backlash free to swing allegations about widows — of men automatically assumed to be guilty; of courts hair-trigger reactions, severing their parental rights, of the massive and premature jailing of alleged offenders...

The actions dictated by those who focus on individual pathology are carefully claimed to derive from no moral or political base; ordered to no social goal beyond that of patching the wounded. This has left the moral high ground for the backlash to seize, themselves portraying as the grievously wronged, as the real victims; declaiming the violation of their rights. No one much speaks of the child's rights; of her right to remain free of what — where fathers and stepfathers are concerned — is surely sexual slavery.

Working backwards from the diagnostic category of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, much has recently been made of likening the psychological effects of incest to the effects of captivity on political hostages, or the aftermath of war. Yet this has the considerable virtue of extricating the emotional damage from the woe of disorders ascribed to biology and female pathology, it still focuses on a psychiatric diagnostic category, on the need to prove severe and lasting injury. It still retains the medical model. And is of little importance different. Combat takes place in the open documentary context of war, with the other side clearly marked 'enemy'. It has the support of the state and generally is seen as necessary for some greater good. While casualties and fatalities may be labelled a byproduct to winning, they are expected. It is openly agreed that trampling the other side is the goal.

Similarly, those who fall victim to terrorists and are captured are the (questioning) victims of a deliberate act openly intended to cause terror. It is considered an act of high value to resist and to try to escape. For all that the effects (symptoms) of 'post traumatic stress' may be similar to the effects of incest, extending that clinical analysis to routinely child-rape by fathers and stepfathers has remarkable implications. Neither national enemies nor political terrorists stand in a position of trust to their victims; they are not expected to act in their captives' interests.

Within the family, we would not be willing. I suspect, to say of fathers and stepfathers the same: that, as a class, they can be expected to behave like the enemy. That is the meaning behind the rhetoric about incest as a 'betrayal of trust'.

While a great deal has been about that betrayal, little has been about the fact that the offenders are persons the children are beholden to obey. This is one of the prime sticky wrenches of incest (as opposed to generalised child sexual abuse) prevention. Obedience is part of the deal. You get no medals for escape from your captor or for running away, and certainly not for turning a weapon on him.

Additionally, the problem with the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder model is that it masks the gratuitousness and the deliberateness of the offence, and the fact that it is so often done amidst feelings of love.

More cogent than a combat-hostage model, which is predicated on later emotional distress, is a basic civil rights argument: that parental child-rape is a form of sexual slavery — a society in which slavery is emphatically illegal. We are not talking here of a child's right to refuse to do her homework or to clean her room. We are talking about the offender's act of sexual enslavement. He stands in a position to make both legal and illegal demands, and to do so as a matter of routine. Of course we would be back in courts with this paradigm, and conse- quently back with all the evidentiary issues and court biases and charges about protecting...
mothers and radical feminist therapists program- ming, the time is not far off. But at least to see it as sexual enslavement is to more clearly name what it is for offenders to do (rather than focusing on later emotional or physical repair in the victims). And it is to begin to speak the language of accountability. To name it 'sexual slavery' would at least position incest as exploitation for the benefit of the slave-holder.

You'll remember that even as the framing of the Thirteenth Amendment was being negoti- ated, there were those who saw the explicit connections between the enslavement of Blacks in this country and the status of children. There were those who saw the connection so clearly, in fact, that they sought to explicitly exempt children from the protections of a ban on slavery. We have spent fifteen years convincing demonstrations to show that incest is not safe to bring up in any court. We have spent fifteen years extolling as the solution the therapeutic response, the therapeutic ideology. The kids who have been treated with all this benign sensitivity do not, in my listening experience, seem to be saying thank you.

My friend Tracy puts it well. She blew the whistle on her father when she was thirteen, spent a short while in foster care (with mandatory therapy). A psychiatric evaluation brought her three years in various mental health facilities. I asked Tracy if she saw any relevance in the response to her problem.

"I do - not - understand," she said. "I do understand that it was important a dozen years ago for you to tell people this stuff happened. But I do not understand how much of the silence and all that. But we did that. "Now we're just going out and over the same shit over and over again. "At least I have. And I think it's now time to deal with how we're dealing with it. Fine, we know that incest is there. We know that these things exist. We know that it's happened to a lot of people. And I think...I think we all feel that we're not alone anymore. I mean, give me a break: I do not feel alone.
"I'm talking about what I'm talking about, 'counselling' everywhere. There's so much 'treatment' out there it's not funny. But they don't discuss what kind of treatment it is. They don't talk about how this stuff is helping nobody.
"The difference between saying, 'Yes, this happened to me, too,' and going after the offenders is that all this speaking about it just makes you a patient or an inmate. It doesn't take you to where you want to be. Because if you say, 'My dad is a pervert,' you're just going to make him feel bad. Or did we do this. Go do something about it. Then you're challenging a higher power. I feel there's a war going on with all this who's gonna get which kids in treatment.

"And I feel in my mind that there should be a war on the treaties. Some days, I just want to go in and let all the kids in 'treatment' go free — let them out, like the animal rights groups let Nazis out. Set them free. But — what are the kids gonna do then?"

I think we should be less surprised to find that the kids we have beckoned forward, told to tell, in these years — the kids that have been victimised by custody courts, the kids coerced into endless therapeutic circumstances — may well have been re-victimized. Not a small number of kids suggested to me that it was harder to survive the ensuing 'help' and 'treatment' than it was to survive the incest.

What happened to them felt like punishment of them. It did not help to keep telling them over and over that the incest was not their fault.

Oddly enough, we could have anticipated the response from the 'bad boys'. What we could not have anticipated was how much ammunition would be proffered to them by the 'good guys'.

We could not have anticipated the degree of dominance of the therapeutic ideology. Nor the way in which a concept like speaking out would be transformed from a political one into a clinical or therapeutic one. The way in which the feminist concept of the personal as political would be translated to read the personal is public. Nor the way in which the dominant rise of talk shows would work to take the making of the personal public, and transform that — so that what appeared to be public in fact conveyed the idea that the issue was intensely private: a matter of individual treatment, individual survival.

No matter how men of power or caregivers or teachers or counsellors everywhere, counselling everywhere. There's so much 'treatment' out there it's not funny. But they don't discuss what kind of treatment it is. They don't talk about how this stuff is helping nobody.

"The difference between saying, 'Yes, this happened to me, too,' and going after the offenders is that all this speaking about it just makes you a patient or an inmate. It doesn't challenge power. Because if you say, 'My dad is a pervert,' you're just going to make him feel bad. Or did we do this. Go do something about it. Then you're challenging a higher power. I feel there's a war going on with all this who's gonna get which kids in treatment.

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"The difference between saying, 'Yes, this
Exchanging Feminist Words

Following the publication of Only Words earlier this year, Catharine MacKinnon spoke to Joan Scanlon about her work developing theoretical perspectives and their practical implementation.

Joan Scanlon: Could you say something about the way in which Canadian women's groups tackled some of the issues you raise in this book — for example the relationship between substantive equality and abstract equality?

Catharine MacKinnon: Canadian women managed a super-human feat to get as strong language as they did in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms — but an even better equality provision could be framed, building on that experience. It would be even more substantive, abolish the subordination of women to men, and find ways to address social as well as legal inequality. A Bill of Rights should be written with those goals in mind, and I would be honoured to provide technical consultation. The problem usually is, whether anyone with power in the process wants inequality to be effectively addressed.

Joan: Both Canada and the US have guarantees of free speech and equality, yet one of the things that you say in the book is that the relationship between equality and speech is different in the Canadian constitution. Could you explain how it’s different?

Catharine: US law protects hate speech and pornography as expression, and doesn’t recognize the equality issues they raise at all. Canada adopted a serious approach to equality that also differs from the more abstract American approach, and applied it to its hate propaganda statute to save that statute as an equality provision from being struck down as a violation of freedom of speech — so that racial hate propaganda in Canada is now understood as a violation of equality rights, not just saying bad things about good people. And then when the obscenity provision was similarly attacked, the Canadian Supreme Court saved it in the same way, accepting the approach that Andrea Dworkin and I created, recognizing that pornography harms women and equality. They used the equality interests in the Canadian constitution to argue that equality rights were more important than whatever speech rights were being restricted by restricting pornography.

Joan: One thing that puzzled me is that the ordinance that you and Andrea Dworkin introduced was civil rights legislation — and yet obscenity law both here and presumably in Canada is criminal legislation.

Catharine: We don’t favour criminal approaches in general. I had been working for a long time with a Canadian women’s rights litigation organization — LEAF (the Women’s Legal and Educational Action Fund) — and they decided that they wanted to save their obscenity law by reinterpreting it in terms of harm to women. Canadian women have a different relationship to criminal law in general. They think that if the harm is to their autonomy or their right to determine what they do, it should be protected as harm to a legal subject.

For me, personally, optimism is a struggle. Pessimism is unbearable. To stand on neither side of an ever-tensing polarity is to feel excluded, to feel — well, yes: alone. The energy and passion that informed our early protests are now dismissed as unstylish. The clarity, the naming, is labelled simplistic. The humour that lubricated the early stages of the journey is now taken for schtick.

Do I believe there will come a time soon when women will, on this issue, once again listen to their own voices, follow their own moral compass toward their own defined goals — independent of experts? I need to believe that I continue to hope for change.

For all the talk of listening to the children, there is a very important sense the children continue unheard. Their voices come to us through interpreters. Do I believe we will ever start really listening to the kids themselves? Again, I need to believe that I continue to hope for change.

And of course I do quite profoundly hope for change.

I’ve been down all the fascinating highways and byways that radiate out from this issue so far. It’s been one hell of a trip.

For all the curlicues, filigrees, and baroquey, however, I remain as convinced as ever that we were not incorrect the first time out in identifying incest as the cradle of sexual politics.

We gave it a push.

The cradle is still rocking.

It remains to be seen what will happen next. #


and Canadian women generally — whatever the Supreme Court decided about the obscenity law, should urge Parliament to pass our civil rights law against pornography. Under the rationale through which the obscenity law was interpreted, our ordinance would most likely be constitutional. The question then becomes whether it is politically possible to pass this law, which would constitute a real remedy for pornography in Canada. One reason why we oppose criminal remedies is not only that they empower the state to do all the wrong things, but they don’t give women power to do the right things, so they don’t get used. Usually governments don’t want to do anything against the pornography industry; and so they do nothing. So far that’s exactly what’s happened in Canada.

**Pornography and art**

**Joan:** Also, regardless of whether or not the legislative initiatives you introduce are criminal or civil they will always be perceived as censorship. With obscenity laws, the arguments about “art” — which you allude to in this book — get trotted out far more readily, because you are discussing pornography within that frame of reference.

**Catharine:** That’s really right. Obscenity laws all have a provision that says that if the materials are “artistically valuable” they are not obscene. So presumably obscenity laws are supposed to take care of that — but they never do. They have always been more usable against art than they are against the pornography industry. By contrast, our ordinance uses a harm test. Women don’t get raped because of great art; they get raped because of the pornography industry. If you have a test that makes whether something is pornography turn on whether women get hurt, you target the pornography industry, not great art. Some people then want you to add a provision which says that great art is more valuable and important than whether or not women are harmed; in other words, if a woman is raped shouldn’t we also take into account whether the picture of it is a pretty one? So the fact we are raped or killed would be outweighed by whether the product of doing that was “valuable” or not. It’s an outrage to women’s human status.

**Joan:** The only thing I wonder is, when you talk about “pretty images”, in other words where aesthetic value is added to similar content, isn’t that precisely what makes it “art”? You seem to be saying, here and in the book, that you can distinguish between art and pornography, but surely aesthetics don’t let art off the hook? It seems to me that we can’t make that distinction in terms of the artefact, but only in terms of its production.

**Catharine:** And also in terms of the harm that it does, and under our definition.

**Joan:** Your definition is a very clear statement about what’s pornographic, but it is surely not exempt from that definition.

**Catharine:** No, it isn’t exempt as such. If it does the harm, it’s pornography, and it doesn’t matter if somebody else thinks it’s art.

**Joan:** Then surely what that means is that art is everything that your definition is not — which is not how it’s generally understood.

**Catharine:** That’s exactly right. Anything that is not under our definition can be called anything at all. What we have done is to define pornography in terms that essentially describe the products of the pornography industry. Whatever else it also describes, which it really is very little of what anybody considers art, also belongs under that definition. It belongs there because it’s proven to do the same harm. One way someone who is dealing with those materials can tell whether it does the harm or not is by looking at the contents, as we listed them in the definition. If that content is there, and the materials are sexually explicit, it is very likely that the materials will be able to be proven to subordinate women.

**Racist and sexual harassment**

**Joan:** Some of us have had quite animated discussions recently about the chapter in your book where you talk about the relationship between racial and sexual harassment. I was interested in the section where you talk about the place of sex within sexual [note: racial?] harassment and abuse, and about how this ‘manipulates the perpetrators’ socialized body relatively primordially and directly’. I wondered whether it wasn’t true that all forms of hate speech operate at a vicarious level, rather than as an opinion or idea or argument — for example the irrational fear of other races which fuels neo-Nazi violence...
sexual domination. It's as if you can't do anything about this abuse until you have the final answers, and I don't think that's right.

Reclaiming 'pleasure'

Joan: Linked with that is a question I wanted to ask you about your work in general. One of the most significant things for me about Feminism Unmodified was the way in which it opened up a different way of thinking about, and asking questions about, sexuality. In the introduction to that book, and in the essay 'Desire and Power', you talk about the way in which women's powerlessness and humiliation is actually made 'pleasurable' or 'sexy' for them. That helped me in teaching women's studies and thinking about the issue of sexuality and then just as a physical or sexual response takes place in response to abuse, degradation or humiliation, is that really pleasure? Should we even continue to use that word? I wondered, where you talk in Only Words about women's pleasure being 'both fake and at times tragically real' in response to abuse, whether there's an argument for saying that's a term we need to reclaim to describe a different reality for women?

Catherine: That's visionary! The discussion of that theme, for me, has been beaten down to where it wasn't possible for me to imagine that until you just said it. 'Pleasure' has been their term. Because I don't deny the reality of women's reported experiences, when people say that they experience pleasure from X, what I try to do is to reconceptualize X, rather than take back the word. There is a very serious process in choosing what words we give away and what words we try to reclaim. I decided to reclaim equality. Early and excellent feminist essays and arguments give away equality, looking at what it means, saying: We don't want it, like it out with the trash, wrap fish in it, do anything with it, but keep it away from us; we want freedom, we want liberation, we want change, and equality means this and equality surely doesn't mean that. They were descriptively right, but I decided I wanted equality back for us and put some twenty five years into getting it back, trying to make it ours. Believe me we had to go back. As Aristotle and say he was wrong to even begin to do it. With 'pleasure', I guess the reason I have let them have it, is that it seems to be a term that people attach to an experience of physiological release, an endorphine connection that can be stimulated by aggression, pain, manipulation, abuse and violation — even though that can absolutely no connection with what someone really wants, what they like, or the kind of life they want to have. So I just never thought to try to think about pleasure in different terms, and have been concerned instead with reclaiming women's lives for ourselves so that we reconfront our experiences and have the pleasure we choose rather than the pleasure that's imposed on us. And now you say pleasure should only mean that which we choose and which is consistent with our values and the lives we want to have. I'll see you twenty five years from now...

Joan: It occurred to me because your analysis of sexuality — which in Feminism Unmodified meshes with an analysis of women's oppression as a whole, it is probably more thorough-going than any other radical feminist theorist...

Catherine: And Andrea Dworkin also. What I was thinking of in particular was that even though other radical feminists have acknowledged the role of sexuality in women's oppression, they have seen it as part of women's oppression, or additional to, but not part of women's oppression, including economic exploitation.

Catherine: It also has a lot to do with women's 'collaboration' in our own inequality, which cannot be left out of any serious discussion. It's not that women do nothing but give in to inequality; women fight against it all the time and everywhere. But no matter how much we've done that, we're still a part of it, and it's a part of us. We don't know if women everywhere fought against it at the same moment whether or not we would; we've never even done that. That's one of the things that Andrea Dworkin's book Intercourse is so brilliant on; she asks the question: Why aren't women free? and answers it: Not only through n't it ways of envisioning sex but also through women's role in it.

War rape & international law

Joan: There have been references in the media to the fact that you are representing women seeking justice for atrocities committed against them by the Serbian forces, yet there has been little coverage of what you are actually doing. At the same time there's a lot of focus in the media about the fact that nobody is doing anything. Could you tell us more about exactly you are doing, how it began, how the cases of the Croatian and Muslim women you are representing are developing, and what you think the importance of it is more widely?

Catherine: Well, it began because they approached me. They had been informing me about the atrocities against them since the Serbian invasion of Croatia, talking about the mass rapes and murders of all non-Serbian women, by the Serbian fascist forces. There was nothing in the papers. They persisted and eventually got some people to believe them, and the story broke in public. Then when they asked me if I would represent them, it came completely out of the blue for me. They had a more creative idea about lawyering that I had at that time envisioned; usually if you are going to represent someone there's a court to go to and a possible legal claim. In some ways we had to create both. They identified me as someone who had stood up for the most abused women, meaning women in pornography, in prostitution, and women that had taken a lot of heat for speaking out for women that no-one believed. They said they had noticed that I stuck by those women for years and years, and they figured that was what this was going to be. I agreed to represent them, and things went from there. They wanted international justice for the sexual atrocities committed against them in the Serbian genocide. We were working to help establish an international tribunal on war crimes, and canvassing our options, which for women acting on their own behalf are incredibly few, when Radovan Karadzic, the leader of the Bosnian Serb fascists, visited the United Nations supposedly to negotiate peace. One option we knew we had was a civil suit under the Alien Tort Claims Act, an old law that allows non-citizens to sue for violations of international law if the perpetrator of the injuries is found in the United States. So we brought it, with the help of NOW/DEF (National Organisation for Women Legal Defence and Education Fund) for rape, genocide, torture, murder — the whole range of atrocities committed against Muslim and Croatian women by Karadzic's forces, under his command and orders. We are asking for an injunction, an order to stop the ethnic cleansing. This is what we can do. As to its larger importance, the suit recognizes rape as a violation of human rights, specifically as an act of genocide, which is what it is in this situation. We are waiting for a ruling on preliminary motions and continuing to cooperate with the UN, although it remains unclear whether the tribunal in the Hague will proceed against rapists or leaders as it should.

Joan: One of the repeated misunderstandings — or stumbling blocks to an engagement with what you are saying about all this — is the assumption that you are confusing rape with a film of a rape or any representation of a rape. Also that you are trivialising rape by introducing the issue of pornography. One of the things I have been baffled by is why, for example in letters to Ms. magazine following the publication of your article about the rape/death camps in former Yugoslavia, any woman would dispute the fact that a film or photographs of another woman's rape actually compound and perpetuate her abuse, when her torture and degradation become someone else's entertainment. Why do you think that misunderstanding keeps happening?

Catherine: Well, it's a wielded misunderstanding, also based on things I have never said. I never said pornography is rape, for example, or anything like it. The article in Ms. was written because the survivors wanted it written. They wanted this piece of their abuse out in a way that was true and accountable to them. I never said the pornography was worse than the rape. It does continue the violation, where otherwise your rape really stays within yourself: One of the reasons for the psychological survival mechanisms women have, including actually not remembering some atrocities, is to be able to continue to live. When you know that the pornography isn't just in your own head but is out there in the world, it's unbearable. The women who had the pornography made of them wanted that confronted. It has been interesting to me, having worked on other issues also for a long time, that with pornography, one encounters
Organised and ritual abuse
Joan: Another thing which is dogged by misinformation and disbelief is the issue of ritual abuse. We have just had a Department of Health report which states that satanic abuse doesn’t exist — although there appears to be an acceptance that ritual abuse does take place in certain limited circumstances — and needless to say the media are focusing on the former. Since most people confuse the two it amounts to a total denial, not helped by the latest hype about “False Memory Syndrome”. And yet rape crisis workers are dealing with this more and more, as more survivors begin to speak about their abuse. You mention in the book that you have been doing research into the production of pornography in groups, and you talk about the relation between sex rings, organised crime, religious cults, and while supremacist organisations — or perhaps you were just listing different forms of organised abuse. Can you say anything more about it at this stage?

Catherine: There are criminal organisations that engage in group abuse of women and children. Terms like ‘ritual abuse’, ‘satanic abuse’, etc., are only partially descriptive and have taken on a life of their own in certain public discussions, but the reality is there. It is a much broader reality of organised group abuse, sometimes with a religious cover, sometimes in relation to religious or political views. While that is of some interest, what is most crucial is the abuse, and that is organisational. We’re talking about criminals, in family and extended family settings, sometimes church organisations, fraternal organisations, political organisations, including white supremacist ones, who are abusing children and women on a mass scale, a good many of them making visual recordings of it, some of which are sold.

Joan: One of the things that women here who have been trying to support survivors of organised abuse have encountered is the need to find different ways of working, adapting and even sometimes suspending the usual ways of working that have been learned from working with survivors of sexual violence.

Catherine: Most survivors of this extreme abuse have developed particular ways of dealing with it. As children they were abused in horrifically painful ways, in ways that almost no human being could ever survive, physically or mentally. A lot don’t survive. They have died or gone crazy, those people who we have never heard from, and never will. Those who have survived to talk about it are those whose minds have this genius of survival, mechanisms which prove in a sense that this is what has happened to them, but are then used to destroy their credibility. You are dealing with people who have become many people, because no single person could live through it. And the fact that they are many people, and that you could at any moment, if the little ones trust you, be talking to a five year old in a thirty year old body, is taken as bizarre. Well, the unity self can be a fundamental assumption of Western philosophy, in part because people haven’t been listening very well for quite some time. If you listen up, there’s more out there than you thought.

Re-writing feminism
Joan: Going to back to your book, and given the latest round of CamillePaglia, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf...

Catherine: I wouldn’t put Naomi in the same category — still not.

Joan: Well, in relation to this particular question, I would — but tell me if you think I’m wrong to do so. Those of us who want to assert the reality of women’s victimisation are ourselves repeatedly accused of treating women only as victims — or even worse making women into victims...

Catherine: Yes, it’s amazing that all of male supremacy can’t make women into victims, but we can, feminists criticizing the victimization of women can. This is double-think and mind-rot, as well as politically perverse, opportunistically careerist and analytically desperate. And yet, in spite of everything, I continue to feel a strong sisterhood with those women who are into denying reality. I have less sympathy with them trying to get in the way of us doing something about reality, and with their participation in putting other women down, including violated women. But I have a lot of sympathy for their deeply rooted impulse to want to live in an equal world — which is where their position comes from. They want to live in a fantasy if they can’t live in a reality they like, and while I have no sympathy at all for the choice, which is made at other women’s expense, I have a lot of sympathy for the desire to live in a different reality. Their denial also works to their own advantage, because of the way they can be used to benefit male supremacy by maintaining the illusion that all this is really equality — we have it already, so what’s your problem, honey? Being used as a weapon against us is something they don’t seem to resent, and some of them, at least, should.

Joan: I wanted to ask you that because that accusation of treating women as victims comes up so often. If we are trying both to document the reality of women’s oppression and acknowledge women as agents of change, creating a space for themselves to act, personally and collectively, what strategies best address that double aim? Your sexual harassment literature, and the ordinance you drafted with Andrea Dworkin, not only recognise women’s victimisation, but also aim to give women the tools to remedy it. What do you see as the relationship between legal discourse and everyday language (for example in the naming of crimes such as rape and sexual harassment), and between legal strategies and other forms of activism?

Catherine: One interesting thing about law is that it provides the possibility of acknowledging how bad reality is in the process of doing something about it. So it isn’t an abstract discussion, pillorying reality, but about facing reality where you can see it can change. Those who can’t see it can change seem unable to face reality, and they’re saying we’re grim, when we’re the optimists here, because we understand it can change — and that’s partly because we’re the ones who are working to change it. Women in general respond like that. You can discuss pornography as much as you like, and educate, and people will listen and think maybe. But the minute you propose a law that women can use to stop the pornographers, they are coming out of the woodwork to tell you how it has been hurting them all along. Then you know that up to that point they were silent. Those who say women aren’t hurt through pornography collaborate in that silence. If those women aren’t speaking, it’s because nothing is addressing their violations concretely. The minute you propose something like our law which could do something, you don’t have enough hours in the day to listen to women’s experience of how they have been violated by it. At the time we interpreted the sex discrimination law to stop sexual harassment, there had been no real studies of it. We had no idea how much there was of it; all there had to be was a few women to create a legal claim. If it’s happened to one woman it’s bad enough; you go to court to do something about it. Only when we had a law about sexual harassment were we able to put down and document how much of it there was because it became conceivable that it didn’t have to be that way. People think that first you have social change and then a law follows. I don’t think it works that way; law is social, the kind of power we’re up against means that you need to have some power on your side before the social process happens to make needed legal change possible. And then that legal change, which is itself a process, becomes part of a larger social change. Also part of the social change we need
to get legal change comes through the process of fighting for it. That in turn must be power to women to make the law work; women have got to have enough power to be able to get it and use it, and then be able to use it and win, and then sometimes lose and fight back against those losses. And that is all part of one long political process.

Visions of possibility

Joan: In Feminism Unmodified there's a passage which is quite utopian, arguing that we need not only to face the reality that is but to think beyond that and have a vision of what's possible, and to look for answers to questions we can scarcely formulate. Do you still see it the same way?

Catherine: I think that the most important questions are the ones we can't quite ask, not because they're hard but because we don't have the conditions we need to ask them. I still think the most invisible women know the most, and the women who are most silenced know what we must need to hear. I still think that the most powerful forces operate the least visibly. But I also think we are getting somewhere, and the organizations of formerly prostituted women against prostitution show that. Women organizing worldwide against this industry, including women in it, I never thought I would see in my lifetime, but we're seeing it.

Joan: Why was I asking that was because I think we need not only to imagine a world in which these things don't happen, but to try to imagine what that world would look like — in order to have something to work towards as well as against. In my view Feminism Unmodified embodied that balance between pragmatism and idealism. For me, the underpinning of that is a lesbian feminist politics. I completely agree with your analysis there of heterosexuality, and the way in which those patterns of domination and subordination can carry over into any sexual relationship...

Catherine: They can define a person's sexuality, whoever you're having sex with.

Joan: ...And I also agree that sex wouldn't generally be recognised as sex if it didn't manifest that dynamic. But I think there is also an imperative — not a priority, but as part of a political process — to look for possibilities of change in personal relationships. And I think that it's within lesbian feminist relationships that there's a greater possibility for change at that level.

Catherine: I think there is a tremendous possibility for change there, and also a clear recognition of these issues and of women's attempt to have both personal integrity and a principled politics there. When you were talking earlier about the possibilities of sexual equality — a sexuality of equality — it is exactly that possibility that lesbian feminism has been most brilliant at envisioning, both in criticizing existing reality and in working towards a new one. It goes to the heart of the gender issue, and attempts — and I don't mean to make it into a construct of a thought, because it has more emotional integrity than being the lived-outness of a thought — but it poses the possibility of having a life, and opens onto a greater equality of women, for having a place in one's life that is not so up against male supremacy. There are precious few areas which offer that. It makes a lot of sense that it would be stigmatized, precisely because it opens that possibility for freedom.

Joan: But lesbianism needs to be understood by an absolutely uncompromising critique of heterosexuality, and a recognition that one doesn't automatically obviate those problems...

Catherine: That's all one has to say, I think, that it isn't complacent or superior. People bring it up all the time, but it has been my experience that lesbian feminism is much more ready to be self-critical than militant heterosexuality has ever been, for example in looking at its role in male dominance.

Joan: Is there anything else you want to say about the book, or in general, that I haven't asked?

Catherine: No, I don't think so — except that it's such a relief to be talking about real ideas and real life.

Statement by Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin regarding Canadian Customs and Legal Approaches to Pornography

Untrue reports have been circulating that our feminist work against pornography is responsible for the repression of feminists, gay, and lesbian materials in Canada. It is said that the anti-pornography civil rights law we coauthored was passed by the Canadians and that the first thing they did with it was censor gay books. It is said that Canada Customs recently seized feminist, gay and lesbian materials — including some books by Andrea Dworkin — under a 1992 Supreme Court decision called Butler that accepted our legal approach to pornography. It is said that in practice, Canadian court decisions using our anti-pornography legal theories are backfiring against liberating sexual literature. We want you to have real information about what has and has not happened.

The Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Law We Coauthored

Canada has not adopted our civil rights law against pornography. It has not adopted our statutory definition of pornography; it has not adopted our civil (as opposed to criminal) approach to pornography; nor has Canada adopted any of the five civil causes of action we proposed (coercion, assault, force, trafficking, defamation). No such legislation has as yet even been introduced in Canada.

The Canadian Supreme Court's Butler Decision

In 1992, the Supreme Court of Canada unani- mously adopted an equality approach to pornography's harms to women. This approach was argued by the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), an organization of progressive Canadian women committed to advancing women's equality under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the new Canadian constitution. Unlike the US Constitution — which doesn't even have an Equal Rights Amendment — the Canadian Charter specifically guarantees sex equality and has been interpreted to require the government to promote it.

Donald Victor Butler, a pornographer, had been prosecuted by authorities under Canada's existing law against 'obscenity', which is defined as 'the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty, and violence'. This is very different from US and British obscenity definitions. Butler argued that the obscenity law violated his rights to free speech under the new Charter. LEAF urged the Canadian Supreme Court to reject his argument and instead to reinterpret the existing obscenity law in 'sex equality' terms.

Previously, in a case called Kegfast, LEAF had successfully argued before the Canadian Supreme Court that racist and anti-Semitic hate propaganda violates equality and multiculturalism rights under the Charter, so criminalizing such expression is constitutional. LEAF sought to build on that argument, and other equality precedents, in Butler. Catharine MacKinnon, working with LEAF and LEAF counsel Kathleen Mahoney, participated in Kegfast and Butler. Andrea Dworkin, consulted by LEAF on the Butler case, opposed LEAF's position. Dworkin wrote a letter arguing that no criminal obscenity law should be supported.

The Supreme Court of Canada, in its decision in Butler, accepted the essentials of LEAF's equality argument. The court held that the obscenity law was unconstitutional if used to restrict materials on a moral basis, but constitutional if used to promote sex equality. The court interpreted the criminal 'obscenity' provision to prohibit materials that harm women.

Canadian Customs Procedures

For years Canada Customs has stopped material as the border under its own law and guidelines, which allow employers discretion to block the importation of obscenity. As a sovereign state, Canada has every right to control its borders — especially given widespread resentment against
what is often viewed there as US cultural imperialism.
None of Canada's customs policies or practices has been officially revised to reflect or incorporate the Butler-era equality politics. A Canadian newspaper columnist found this out simply by asking Customs directly.4 Canadian customs employees have been doing what they have been authorized to do for years before Butler. For example, in 1993 some books by Andrea Dworkin were detained at the border for inspection, then released shortly thereafter. Those who cite this episode to show that Butler is being used against Dworkin misrepresent longstanding Canada Customs practices.
Reports that Canada Customs is using Butler to crack down on importation of explicitly gay and lesbian material are also fabricated. If this was actually happening, it would be illegal and could be opposed under Butler, which made the restriction of material on the basis of a moral objection (such as homosexuality) conclusively unconstitutional for the first time. The ruling clearly states that material that harms women can constitutionally be stopped (and this would include women harming women), but Butler does not mention anything about men harming men. Butler is silent on the subject of same-sex materials as such.

The Real Result of Butler
Canada Customs has a long record of homophobic seizures, producing an equally long record of lawful and justifiable outrage from the Canadian lesbian and gay community. There is no evidence that whatever is happening at the border now is different from what happened before the Butler decision — except that Butler has made moralizing, homophobic Customs seizures illegal. For instance, when one court issued an outrageously homophobic decision against some gay male material, another court, citing Butler, specifically repudiated the moralism of that decision.
To date one indictment under Butler has been brought against a lesbian sadomasochistic material, a magazine published in the US with a Canadian circulation of 40. If this magazine is proven to harm women, including by producing civil inequality, the case should result in a conviction. Meanwhile various indictments brought against sexually explicit materials that do not show violence have been dismissed under Butler.

Canada's criminal obscenity law since Butler — like all prior laws that put power in the hands of government prosecutors rather than harmed plaintiffs — has not actually been used effectively to stop the pornography industry. This we predicted. The pornography industry in Canada has in fact been expanding massively, trafficking openly in materials that do not show explicit violence, including some of the exact materials prosecuted in Butler.

Analysis
In the United States, our Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance — together with related legislative initiatives against the harms of racist hate speech — has helped to trigger an escalating constitutional conflict between 'speech' rights guaranteed by the First Amendment and 'equality' rights in the principles underlying the Fourteenth Amendment. In our neighbour nation to the north, Canada's Supreme Court has determined that racist hate expression is unconstitutional (Kegane) and that society's interest in sex equality outweighs pornographers' speech rights (Butler). Taken together, these rulings are a breakthrough in equality jurisprudence, representing major victories for women and all people targeted for race hate. We wish that US constitutional consciousness were so far along.
Although we recognize that the equality test adopted by Butler is an improvement on Canada's criminal obscenity law, we still do not advocate criminal obscenity approaches to pornography. They empower the state rather than the victims, with the result that little is done against the pornography industry.
We are encouraged, however, that the Butler decision under Canada's new Charter makes it likely that our civil rights law against pornography would be found constitutional if passed there. And we are counting on the pornography to empower victims to fight back against harm committed by pornographers.

What might muscles on women have to do with strength? Pen Coles shows the lengths to which the building industry is prepared to go to hide, excuse and sexualize these threatening muscular developments and to keep female bodybuilders feminine.

FEMININE CHARMS
AND OUTRAGEOUS ARMS

What might muscles on women have to do with strength? Pen Coles shows the lengths to which the building industry is prepared to go to hide, excuse and sexualize these threatening muscular developments and to keep female bodybuilders feminine.

This article developed out of a course which looked at representations of the body, particularly the female body, within patriarchal culture. I decided to look closely at the female bodybuilder, the way the building industry and patriarchal ideology in general temper with her and her final contest appearance which is an odd mixture of muscle and make-up.

The female bodybuilder raises some important questions for feminists because of the ways in which she challenges traditional ideas about femininity. Patriarchal ideology depends on and enforces the idea that sex, gender and sexuality come together "naturally" as a package, if you are born female, therefore you must naturally be feminine and heterosexual. The female bodybuilder, however, particularly during her performance in competitions, challenges all these ideas together, demonstrating that femininity, heterosexuality and even the female body are constructs.

Taming The Beast
In a bid to apologise for and to soften female muscle, repeated strategies are employed to ensnare, engender and heterosexualise the female bodybuilder's disturbing physique. This muscle is repeatedly adored, restricted and confined. This very confinement seems, however, to fail from the outset. Highs and lows on the contest stage, pumped, flexed, and increasingly taking up space with each competition, the female bodybuilder is a threatening sight. Ironically, patriarchic's attempt to feminise her muscle makes her appearance all the more unusual and unsettling.

The female bodybuilder signposts the domestication of the female bodybuilder as a repeated ritualising of her, 'emphasising certain features, suppressing others, and papering over contradictions'. Dance Clark describes this 'taming' process again in a fascinating essay which compares lesbian style and female bodybuilders, demonstrating the ways in which patriarchal ideology strives to homogenise and collapse both into a non-threatening sameness fit for heterosexual society. This is carried out on the female bodybuilder's body by dressing her up in feminine markers and by dressing down her muscle.

Dressing Down/Ups Muscle
If she comes with such dress codes, the female bodybuilder may be allowed to pass in heterosexual culture. Such 'passing strategies' include covering her muscles with long sleeves and declining to flex them in public. The undisplayed muscle is further promoted by women's magazines. Within these pages, the very women who appear to have surmounted the 'natural' body, reassure the female consumer that her biology, typically her lack of testosterone, will actually prevent her from developing an 'overly' muscular physique. Even were she to possess the 'unique super genes' (or, we might add, the steroids) required for competitive bodybuilding, she may be comforted in the knowledge that, unamped and unflexed, she will appear as 'normal' as the girl next door. As Laurie Schreiber says, the message is that these muscles are a difference that won't make a difference.

‘Muscles Look So Appalling In Evening Dress’

(Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself, Badlyffe Hall)
Bodybuilding magazines, intent on a respectable public image, could not make this point clearer. On the cover of each magazine, the conflation of sex, gender and sexuality is confirmed and guaranteed. In almost every instance, a male bodybuilder grins at the consumer, flexed, erect, hard, oiled and pumped to full performance level. Dwarfed by this muscled monstrosity, often enfolded in his arms, stands what we are led to believe is a female bodybuilder. The woman featured is in fact usually a model. Always in profile, in a classic 'tit n' arse' shot, curving into the male's peak body, this woman performs her difference, setting off his supreme masculinity/whiteness and stamping their heterosexuality.

When the overt display of muscle is called for at competition time and the near naked body staged, feminine props/apologies are called in to reinscribe and 'renaturalise' the female bodybuilder. Instructed to 'get feminine or get out of competitive bodybuilding' (a competition judge's own words), Bev Francis soon received plenty of beauty tips and went about her transformation (which included plastic surgery). Feminising muscle places the greatest emphasis on that single part of the body which seems unmarked by muscle, the face. The female bodybuilder's makeover must compensate as much for the effects of pre-competition diuretics (the face appears pinched and drawn) and steroids (increased facial hair) as for her bulked-up body.

On such a body, a subtle hint of femininity would achieve the effect of thinning. Instead it must be high glamour, overdone and overplayed. Bright, heavy make up and abundant (preferably bound) hair all play their part in this. Although short hair highlights the shoulder width required to compete, competitive female bodybuilders almost always have long hair (tie back at competition time) with their power suits, echoing the eighties message that women in business shouldn't combine short hair with shoulder pads. The hair is also almost invariably bleached blonde. (Out of the nine top winners at the 1988 Ms Olympia contest, seven were blonde.) Manuals for competitors are full of suggestions for bleaching, perming, tinting and complete makeovers. The overall display of the body combines whiteness and youthfulness, the supreme feminine.

Fitting her into the feminine mould, the female bodybuilder is further fitted out at competition time in tiny, brightly coloured string bikinis. Materials include lycra and leather, adding to the body a superpolished fetishistic quick. Photo shots and posing routines are further pumped up with outrageous props and costumes. Examples include Kimberly-Anne Jones, famous for her bondage poses (dressed up in leather and carrying a whip) and Andrea Blanchette, repeatedly photographed in her ripped fishnet tights (and always with her boyfriend).

Lastly, feminine apologies are further extended when female bodybuilders refer in interviews to their softer selves. A 1984 Options article reassures us that, despite external appearances, Kimberly-Anne enjoys her Garfield pajamas and Beverly Hult wreaks at animal affection.

The female bodybuilder's proclamation of sexual difference and feminine identity is further problematised by the likely disappearance of her breasts. Help is at hand, however. Although working out body fat cancels out 'feminine curves', the breasts can at least be rescued in the form of breast implants. While calf implants are banned in bodybuilding, generous allowances are made for the return of the female breast. Ironically (although conveniently for her domesticating), the female bodybuilder's 'hustling up compromises and concaves some of the muscle groups (arms/intercostal/abdominal) required for definition at a competitive level. By lacking breasts onto female muscle, the female bodybuilder might be seen to make a particularly forceful move towards reinscribing herself within the site of the male gaze and male fetishism.

Sexualising Muscle

Perhaps more than any other sport, women's bodybuilding has been subjected to media 'dyke-baiting'. As Laurie Scholte comments, 'pernicious homophobia combine it complex ways to link female bodybuilders with lesbianism'. Indeed the ways in which the muscular woman and the lesbian distress the heterosexual system are closely linked, and they therefore receive similar responses from the dominant culture. Both the muscular woman and the butch lesbian are scorned for wanting to look like men or wanting to be men. Both are therefore often perceived to distort traditional gender appearances as well as gendered behaviour (they are seen as "inappropriately" aggressive, for example). Accused of wanting to look like a man, and therefore necessarily of lesbianism, the female bodybuilder's sexuality is marked as excessive, disruptive and, worse, indifferent to men.

Such charges have resulted in a sustained move to sexualise and wedge female muscle within a heterosexual frame. Her muscle is sold as "sexycast". It is a common form of heterosexual misrepresentation and rejection of her body, which is then represented in this image of a woman. This is a common form of heterosexual misrepresentation and rejection of her body, which is then represented in this image of a woman.
signs, female bodybuilding competitions have often been judged along lines of conventional attractiveness rather than of size. The sport is singular in that the achievement of maximum strength may be rewarded with minimum gain in terms of ranking.

Uncertainties and anxieties abound at competition time: whether to opt for the glamorous, grace and showbiz style of the beauty contest (in which many see female bodybuilding’s origins), or the ‘pure’ bodybuilding context; whether to rank maximum bench press highest or to gauge a basic hour-glass shape joined with shapely ‘feminine’ muscles, thereby maintaining a ‘feminine mystique’ (competitor’s words).

Female bodybuilders appear no more decided. Thus while one woman is typically heard explaining ‘why my muscles had to go’ in order to feel ‘normal’ (quoted in MuscleMag), there are a growing number of female competitors who have no interest in pandering to conventions (in terms of muscle size), but who actively enjoy the confusion that their bulk provokes.

What is clear from this constant squeezing of muscle into a feminine package is that the limits of this package are constantly being strained. As Robert Duff and Lawrence Hagehong comment, ‘the concept of masculinity is relative and is rapidly changing as the sport progresses.’ Moreover, there is a definite rebellious whisper in the ranks which continues to demand attention: ‘We are saying, who are you to tell us what we should look like? We’re saying it with our bodies.’ (Kimberly Anne Jones)

Im/Proper Muscle

The increasing number of women entering the bodybuilding industry and their expanding body mass suggest that the female bodybuilder is not a passing phenomenon despite the confusion she engenders. For in spite of (and, indeed, because of) every endeavour to applaud and coax them, her sabotage of gender norms has simply meant that she is ‘glamour harder to be looked at, to be evaluated and to be discussed.’

That her domesticification continues to fail is evidenced by the perpetual labelling of her by the public. She has been called grotesque, perverse, obscene; disparaged for not being a ‘real’ woman, looking like a male bodybuilder. More commonly, she has been branded freak, homophobe, transvestite, gender impersonator (butch in a frock). Ironically it is the very means by which her muscles are dressed down/up which guarantees her disturbing potential as cross-gendered: ‘within these passing strategies are the very seeds of resistance.’ (Clark) In other words, as we shall see, attempts to feminise the female bodybuilder — the strategem which allows her to “pass” in patriarchal culture — becomes instead the means by which she resists any traditional reading of her as ‘feminine’. ‘The average person cannot understand why any woman would want to look like a man’ (Options 1994).

What is it about muscle which insists on its bearer being irrevocably male? Taken into the cultural arena, muscle is highly gendered, the embodiment of a discourse which states that ‘to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world’.

(Morgan) This space is secured by men by viewing muscle as legitimately theirs. Muscle is therefore ‘naturally’ taken or given to the male. As Richard Dyer says, muscle has been traditionally understood as symbolic of male power and just as patriarchy forces us to see power as something which belongs ‘naturally’ to men, so muscle is seen to be a biological given in men. Natural and real only to him, the representation of muscle is reducible only to him, nullifying the coalition of sex and gender.

The discussions around steroid use amongst bodybuilders is similarly gendered. Within the bodybuilding industry, the potential psychological damage caused by steroid use is downplayed. Instead, the view of such chemicals as ‘true gender benders’ (Muscle & Fitness) is promoted. Overwhelmingly, however, it is women users who are scolded for ‘gender bending’ (even though steroid use by men can result in testicular atrophy and the development of breasts, these side effects are almost invariably hushed up). A discourse of appropriateness/inappropriateness abounds again. Testosterone is popularly and incorrectly understood to be the ‘male sex hormone and is therefore (in its natural and synthetic form) deemed proper only to the male. He is seen to add on the male of which it was always conferred on him, both testosterone and its effects, bulk muscle. The female bodybuilder’s use, by contrast, is deemed improper and monstrous.

Within this discourse of naturalised sex and gender, not only muscles and ‘femininity’ but muscles and woman are exclusive categories. The female bodybuilder would seem then to be an impossible term. Nearly naked on the contest stage, she offers up her natural body dressed up in someone else’s sex signs, not taken on, not added on, but put on. Ultimately, the female bodybuilder’s muscles constitute a kind of drag.

Female Male Impersonators

Male Female Impersonators

It is precisely through the ideas of drag and cross-dressing that the female bodybuilder’s subversiveness can be measured. Many of the ideas we receive about the categories of male/female, masculinity/femininity, set up the male/masculine as the real in our culture: ‘Men are real. Women are “made up”’. (MacCannell and MacCannell) If men and masculinity are seen as natural and authentic categories, then the idea of ‘performing’ masculinity would seem to be a contradiction in terms.

When we see men impersonating women in drag acts, the audience interprets this act as one which exposes women/femininity as artificial or construction. We are less used to seeing this act as the reverse. What happens when we see a woman impersonating men/masculinity, categories which patriarchy has taught us are real? We must surely, as Elizabeth Dresburg has argued, interpret men/masculinity similarly as constructions. The effect of this is that ‘futn in the real may begin to break down’ (Dresburg). The female male impersonator shows us then that the ‘real’ is in fact a lie. This demonstration is undoubtedly subversive for, as Alisa Solomon says, ‘what confers male privilege if not some intangible aura of masculinity — and how potent, how sure is that quality when women can put it on as easily as hats and tails?’ This act of impersonation is even more subversive when it is performed by the female bodybuilder.

Certainly when the female bodybuilder appears at competition time, we do indeed see something resembling an actual stage performance. Glammed up, oiled and engaged in a posing routine, her display takes on an air of high theatricality. Flexing, she camps up and puts on male muscle. Crucially, however, her cross-dress does not disappear once she is off stage. It may be covered or played down, but it isn’t an instantly removable power suit. For this reason, the female bodybuilder performs the transgressive potential of cross-dressing in a particularly radical way — her challenge to traditional ideas of sex and gender is not a costume (like hats and tails) which she can take off after the show; this challenge appears on her body.

The female bodybuilder’s challenge does not rest here, however. For, were they simply to perform masculinity, she could once again be returned to the familiar, returned to ‘wanting to look like a man’. Indeed it is the very strategies which seek to make her more comfortable, less ‘like a man’ which further constitute her disturbance. As Yvonne Tasker observes, ‘It is precisely the femininity of the female bodybuilder that destabilises her relationship to the supposedly passing categories of sex, sexuality and gender.’

Again, as the other, the non-man, the non-real, women are ‘made up’, lending itself to the suggestion that ‘femininity is always drag, no matter who paints on the nail varnish and mascara’. (Solomon) Female bodybuilders in particular are made to ‘dramatisate their sexuality’ (MacCannell/MacCannell), and adopt
extreme trappings of the artificial sex. 'The female muscled body is so dangerous that the proclamation of gender must be made very loudly indeed.' (McGillivray in Toast: Liveness!
and the Freud box score, the cross-dressed woman on the contemporary stage, and the travesty in Lesley Fittis, ed. Crossing The Stage: Masculinity, femininity... "... has been grossly demonstrated." (Solomon).

The final result resembles in many ways a feminine caricature or, more precisely, a male impersonator. Accordingly, as both the Options article and Laurie Schulte point out, the female bodybuilder has frequently been read by her spectators as a male transvestite.

See Is Disbelieving
Both as male impersonator and female male impersonator, the female bodybuilder disrupts clear gender norms. According to Judith Butler, dressing up in gender trappings can imply whatever has been deemed appropriate/proper to one sex, has only been 'appropriately installed as the effect of a compulsory system'.

In other words, while certain things have traditionally been seen to belong 'naturally' to one sex or the other, the drag shows us that the allocation of these things has less to do with what is 'naturally appropriate' and more to do with the effect of a system, in this case patriarchal ideology, which has ruled from the outset of what is 'properly male/female/masculine/feminine. To take this further, Judith Butler suggests that drag reveals that there is nothing inherently natural about gender. Instead, gender is a kind of impersonation/imitation. If we are gender as an imitation, then drag cannot be seen to imitate any original or 'authentic' gender. For example, we might understand a drag act as one which copies masculinity or femininity. But we know that masculinity and femininity are themselves artificial constructions. We can therefore turn our understanding further and see drag as an imitation of an imitation.

Drag can therefore radically undo traditional ideas of a natural gender/natural sex. Through drag, the supposedly fixed binaries of masculinity/femininity, male/female overlap and fall apart. All categories are exposed as false, artificial.

It is precisely this disruption which is undertaken by the female bodybuilder. Spectacular on her stage, seeing her is disbeliefing, for finally she cannot be accommodated on either side of any binary. Enacting a double impersonation, her 'female' body fills out a masculine body drag, laced with super-feminine embellishments. The spectator cannot resolve what she 'ought' to be a woman — and what she appears to be: the impossible juxtaposition of femininity/masculinity, feminine/male, feminine/male impersonator.

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From Sexual Politics to Body Politics

Sussane Koppel explores the consequences of academic feminism's borrowed enthusiasm for the body. She reminds us what the term 'sexual politics' originally meant and argues that a key concern within feminist politics has been to challenge the identification of women with their bodies.

Given the extraordinary vagaries of the term 'sexual politics' in recent times — from the centre of feminist politics into the background of women's studies, into oblivion in gender studies, only to re-emerge as a field of sexual technology in queer studies — it seems worth tracing this development in more detail. In particular, I want to ask how feminism — a politics of women's liberation — is meant simultaneously to participate in an academic (post-structuralist) discourse which is centred around pleasure and the body.

As is well known, feminism — what is known today rather contemptuously as the feminism of the seventies — put its emphasis squarely on sexual politics. Kate Millet's renowned book of the same title for many women signalled a new clarity about how the social inequality of women is to be analysed and understood. The personal is political — the sexual/sexuality is where women individually experience women's collective oppression by men, enforced by individual men. While the relations of power between men and women and social groups are analytically comparable to those of other systems of oppressions, such as class or race, the oppression of women by men is characterised by the fact that individual members of the opposing groups most intimately live together — the way a capitalistic and a worker rarely do, and a master and slave only do, precisely, if the master is a man and the slave is a woman whom he also sexually exploits, that is, specifically as a woman. That is to say, the oppression of women is characterised by the fact that the power relations at the same time define sexuality: men not only have power over women, they also desire them. To put it differently, the gender relationship is characterised by the fact that sexuality determines the power relation and defines the sexes: women are the group of people required for male sexuality to realise itself. They are the collective sex object of men's collective sexual subjectivity. This says nothing as yet, of course, about the sexual practices and experience of individuals; it is an analysis of the collective relations between the sexes in the system we call patriarchy and which Adrienne Rich has specifically called 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

Catharine MacKinnon (1989) has perhaps most radically — and most consistently and clearly — articulated the implications of this analysis:

'feminist critiques identify not just a sexuality that is shaped under conditions of gender inequality but reveals this inequality to be the dynamic of the inequality of the sexes. (p. 130)

Sexuality is not something which we happen to know, taking place in a society under the conditions of gender inequality and which may somehow be affected by it, but on the contrary, sexuality is what effects gender inequality and what defines the 'sexes' or 'gender', just as racism is what defines races, capitalism what defines classes — in differentiations between "kinds" of people that are the result of social and political practices of oppression. It is another way of saying that gender is a social construction and not an essential or natural category. However, the term 'gender' — which was created precisely in order to render this social construction visible and contrast it to notions of biological essentialism — has nevertheless itself
contributed to the survival of a notion of the sexual as natural or biological. For while everyone agrees that gender is socially constructed — leading to cultural notions of femininity, a gender-specific division of labour, a gender-specific division of experience — distinguishing gender from sex has meant that sex continued to constitute the repository of the natural, the given and biological, something which is different from, but underlying 'gender'. Which is why MacKinnon (1983) early on challenged the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that really they are the same and that distinguishing them only replicates the nature/culture distinction.

Feminist critique, in other words, like the critique of racism, is committed to exposing the political nature of biological essentialism and what we perceive to be "biology", which in the modern and sexual age has replaced the ideological function of the God-given. Since we can no longer argue that God wanted man to have dominion over woman and the rest of the universe, or that God created white men to rule over Black people, it has fallen to biology to establish the supremacy of men as a sex and the supremacy of whites as a race in some way "given" and therefore unchangeable.

It is significant, therefore, that in the early eighties and especially in academic practice, feminist or women's studies began to give way to gender studies, while the concept of 'sexual politics' was increasingly replaced by the concept of 'sexual difference'. What used to be the familiar grouping of 'race, class and sex' became 'race, class and sexual difference'. Sexual difference is the conventional term, used in psychoanalysis, medicine and biology, denoting a given biological difference between the sexes, whose pervasive influence on culture and people's physiology structuralism and post-structuralism made it their task to chart and explore. Most of those who speak of sexual difference of course never talked of sexual politics, since psychoanalysis, like other dominant sciences, is firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology. What is interesting, however, is that women — who had been speaking of sexual politics — took over this analysis of sexual difference, trying to mix feminism and post-structuralism, in art to participate in both malestream academicians and feminism.

Refusing intellectual fashions
It has been our view, of course, that feminism cannot be married to particular discourses on intellectual fashions deriving from ideologies which are committed to maintaining the gendered social order — or the same will happen to feminism as happens to any woman marrying a member of the dominant class. Or, to put it differently, it seems a contradiction in terms to want to integrate a critique into the thing it is a critique of, to uphold a dominant discourse and simultaneously its critique. Intellectual discourses are neither neutral nor unengendered, and are as much a matter of politics as anything else. Yet it is common to regard intellectual fashions as if they were simply the latest state of the art, neutral instruments and sophisticated tools which the times oblige us to learn to deploy. Like ordinary fashions, however, they are made, produced and disseminated by interest groups in society with the power to do so. The academy, too, is an institution, with political and social dimension, and above all with interest of its own, crucially dependent moreover on the publishing industry. Hence we need to analyse intellectual discourses both in terms of their cultural-historical significance and their provenance, that is to say, in terms of a politics of discourse.

Thus the academic discourse of sexual difference made its concerted rejection at a time when feminism and the political movement for women's liberation had begun to gain some public ground. Just as, a discourse of cultural difference, of otherness and the Other, is reappearing at a time when the critique of racism is beginning to have some weight on the level of public, that is to say, white-dominated discourse.

I will now focus on a few of the key concepts of the discourse of sexual difference, to analyse their significance from the point of view of feminist critique and in particular, their implication in relation to the politics that used to be called sexual politics, or a politics of women's liberation. From the point of view of a politics of difference, 'concepts', terminology and discursive habits are not just a matter of stylistic choice, but of analytical, in theoretical and political significance. Yet the nature of discourse in such that we may acquire discursive habits and adopt particular terminologies and expressions, not just because we are persuaded of their theoretical appropriateness,

but because they seem the terms currently most available.

Sexual difference transforms sexual politics into body politics. White male academics, following Foucault and co, had started to foreground the individualist. This emphasis on the body also began to exert pressure on the language of feminism. We can see this happen for instance in Maria Mies's book, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, published in 1986. Although in her feminist politics it is certainly not bending to any intellectual fashions, Mies calls one of her chapters 'Body politics', even though what she discusses are in fact the central points of the sexual politics of the feminist movement: campaigns against abortion laws, the critique of the family and family law, the campaign against sexual violence, projections of building refugees/shelters for battered women, rape crisis centres, safe houses for children who have been sexually assaulted etc. All the more curious to call these, as Mies does, 'issues which were all in one way or the other connected with the female body' (24). You might equally say that they are all in one way or another connected with women; you might even say that they are connected, not just in one way or another, but in specific ways, to men, concerning men's laws, politics and practices in relation to women — and not just their bodies either. Generally, in feminist theory, it has become more common to say that something is 'violence against women's bodies', rather than violence against women.

If it is already a problem to call these issues 'women's issues', since there would be no women's issues if they were not men's issues, it is even more problematical to call them issues concerning the female body, for there is no living body of a woman without the woman. What men apparently do to women's bodies they are doing to women. And while many women may learn from the damage done to their bodies, they do not learn to bear what is being done to them. You may learn to bear the injury to your body — supported by that body's remarkable capacity to heal, though its capacity to heal injury does not match men's capacity to cause injury. So a person may learn to bear the violence done to their body, but a person cannot bear the violation of their person. Which is why feminism is not a branch of medicine, healing the female body, but a politics in the interests of women, fighting for women's human rights, their rights to personhood. This is not just a linguistic quibble, a question of stylistic choice: it is the very core of women's history in patriarchy.

Women in our culture have been seen primarily as bodies — sexual bodies — designed for sex and reproduction (though very useful in productive labour too). The nineteenth century called women simply 'the Sex' and every religious and later medical theory asserted women's primary function as wives, mothers and prostitutes, ie as reproducers, raisers of children and providers of sex. The disenfranchised status of women, their status as chattel, as the legal property of fathers, husbands or guardians, without political or legal rights of their own, was the material basis for this cultural understanding of women. What woman thought, what women wanted or felt, was neither here nor there. So long as they had no legal and political status, no opportunity to act publicly, it was of no consequence. That is to say, women were culturally, politically and legally objects rather than subjects.

The reduction of people to object status — be it women in patriarchy, or Black people in slavery — means their reduction to their materiality, their bodies. Their significance, their presence in the social world, is as bodies. As bodies, they can be objects of commerce and barter, private possession, commodities and private property, and means of production and reproduction. Hence the political struggle of women — as of slaves — has been for the emancipation to human status, emancipation from their status as subjectless bodies to the status of political and legal subject. In cultural terms, this has also meant a struggle for public self-expression — the insertion of the voices of women, of Black people, of the dispossessed working classes — into a culture that so far had been the exclusive product of white, educated men. It is the very reason why cultural politics — the public expression of subjectivity on the part of oppressed groups — continues to play such a central role in their struggle for equality.

Body over mind, mind over body
The culture of men, or rather white men — patriarchal culture as we know it — has in its obsessive dualism not only opposed mind to body and hierarchized mind over body, it has also attributed mind to male and body to female and similarly to Black. Since women signified
body, man (who were doing the signifying) meant mind, culture, reason. This allocation of dualisms — Nature/culture, mind/Body, male/ female, white/black, light and darkness etc. — is a commonplace: it is the very basis of our system of symbols which we so aptly deploy in our literary analyses.

It is only very recently in the history of culture that — in the wake of psychoanalysis, sexology and structural anthropology and their creative appropriation through structuralism and post-structuralism — men have apparently discovered their own bodies, and became suddenly fascinated by them. After centuries of suppression, that is to say of relegating body exclusively to women, Blacks and animals, the body has held its triumphant entry into male intellectual culture, spearheaded, as it is also known, by French intellectuals like Foucault, Lacan and the semioticians. The body, of course, henceforth is the male body, thus needing no special qualification.

Seen from a cultural-historical perspective, this is no mean achievement, and as we know, it has been singularly fruitful. The intellectual pleasures of writing, of the visual arts, of cinema, or music, indeed of science and thought of every kind, are newly being analysed as sensual and sexual pleasures, as expressions of a person who is not all mind. The inscription of the body to on these practices has stood at the centre of this project: le plaisir du texte, the pleasure of the text, under Roland Barthes’ virtuosity transforming il jouissance, sexual ecstasy, orgasm.

While this discovery of the body may be exciting and new in the culture of educated white men, it turns into a massive irony when educated women try to appropriate it for women. For it is nothing new for women to return to the body — we never have got away from being identified with it. Men may well be captivated by the metaphor that a writer writes with his penis, that his creative effusions are a kind of ejaculatory, that his work is informed by his body as well as his mind — after centuries of opposition between the ‘lower animal drivers’ and the ‘higher mental stirrings’, the self-imposed choice between ‘art’ and ‘life’, pen and penis. But there are all too familiar echoes in the notion that women write with their wombs, their lips and their breasts, that they undermine without closure, write in milk and blood, or restore the chaotic, the sensual, and the motherly to the orderly but abstract system of significations, either based on or known as ‘the law of the father’. We’ve never been credited with anything else that we could write and think well.

We should therefore recognise men’s newly found fascination with bodily pleasure for what it is a delayed recognition of the moral encumbrances of their own minds. As women, with a cultural history at the opposite end of their dualistic stick, we should have a very special perspective on this development. We may welcome men’s recognition of their own corporeality, less as a discovery of their bodies than as one step towards a recognition of the fallaciousness of the mind-body opposition.

The work cut out, then, is rather to reflect what the world will look like without this mind-body split. How do we re-conceptualise what has been conceived as either body or mind, as not divisible in this manner? How much of our thinking, our thought system, our values, not to speak of our symbolic systems, has been influenced by this conception? What is the significance, for instance, of the concept of pleasure as central in contemporary thought? What sort of pleasure is it, and what is its function?

A test case

The academic debate on pornography may serve as an excellent test case for these questions, since in many ways it exemplifies the development I am describing. For pornography has been the very site of the male culture’s repression of the body on the one hand — its very rebellion to the very pit of the cultural trash can, as its obsessive reification in the representation of women on the other hand. Hence it is what new most needs to be raised to the top, to where mankind’s highest mental stirring have been going on. Thus it is precisely the high rank and renown who today are plying the field of academic pornography, proving that we have overcome not just the mind-body split, but the split between high culture and low culture, higher stirrings and lower stirrings. It shall skip the media professionals, revealing as they may be, and concentrate on what female professors are doing in their wake.

The feminist campaign against pornography, as is well known, has met with strong opposition not only from men, pornographers, the publishing industry, the professionals of culture and lawyers, who all have an obvious stake in the issue, but also from women and specifically from academic feminists. There is no room to enter into the specifics of this clash, except insofar as it touches on our topic — the function of pleasure in intellectual argument. Where feminist critics of pornography have argued that pornography is gendered, produced by men for and to an overwhelmingly extant audience of women — that it is gendered, in other words, like all culture is gendered, but much more visibly so due to its sexual explicitness — the opposition, what is known as pro-pornography feminism, has based its argument squarely on pleasure. Not that pleasure even is the argument, rather it is the natural standard, the obvious criterion, the implicit norm on which the argument is built.

So it is noted by one researcher, for example, and apparently with surprise, that ‘Pornography can also produce physical sensations of sexual arousal in women as well as men.’ (Bower p 41) Research conducted among themselves as well as other women is ponderously presented as counter-evidence allegedly disproving the feminist case: ‘The women I spoke to enjoyed and seek out pornography’ (Loach Sexexp, p 268). Hence a plethora of books and articles are devoted to proving that women, too, may enjoy watching and even producing pornography. Yet we know that women may even enjoy reading Milton or Melville, Shakespeare or Joyce, and that they even enjoy writing literature where the reader is also positioned fundamentally as male.

Or as Toni Morrison has put it in the preface to her William E Measy Sr lectures, published as Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination: ‘For reasons that should not need explanation, this is not true ... the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white.”’ (xiv) This has not prevented Black readers from enjoying American fiction, indeed, from being moved by it, as Morrison herself eloquently proves. Saying that literary imagination has positioned the reader as white — as the cultural imagination in general positions the cultural subject also as male — says nothing about what Black people or women may do, and it most certainly does not say, either, that they do not read, or that they may not enjoy what they are reading. It is an argument not about individuals and their social identity but about the subjectivity of reading and viewing, and how such cultural subjectivity is structured by fictions or images.

As feminists we started from the assumption that women as much as men are being socialised by this culture — the very reason why women too have internalised sexism. As subjects of culture and education, we are all of us socialised to assume an androcentric, sexist, or as we may say metaphorically, a ‘male’ point of view, just as we are all socialised to a racist, eurocentric or ’white’ point of view. But point of view, cultural subjectivity or literary perspective is not what pro-pornography feminists are interested in: their interest is in physical response, bodily arousal, the stirrings of physiology. While there would be nothing particularly bad about this, the problem is in exclusive conception as bodily expression, as the expression of a body in the old and familiar opposition to a mind. Far from being an exploration of how the body is part of a person’s whole person, indivisible from their subjectivity or mind, it turns into an exploration not only of the autonomy of the body, but its supremacy over the ‘mind’.

New age sadism

Although patriarchal culture has treated women as bodies, supposedly without a mind, it nevertheless has long applied itself to the suppositions knowledge that however much objectified, women are not objects but persons endowed with ‘subjectivity’. Contradictory as this project may appear, it is the very seam, the tell-tale sign of where ideology attempts to fuse its contradictions. Thus while straightforward, traditional sadism might be said to ignore the victim’s feelings, it actually presupposes that the victim objects to her victimisation: it is the very thrill of sadism to violate the victim’s will. While sadism is the genre that goes with the historical legal bondage of women, their outright subjugation and disenfranchisement which allows them no subjective expression, ours is the age of sado-masochism.

For the advanced sadism of the modern age sits at the subordination not only of the victim’s body, but also of her will, since her will — women’s will — now has become of consequence. Women may publicly express themselves, give voice to what they think and feel and how they interpret what they experience. Hence the subordination of women’s will can only be achieved through control over its expression — that is to say, if the sadist himself
invents, dramatizes and represents it. Maso-
chism is not, as is popularly thought, an attitude of the victim, it is the sadist’s invention of an attitude for the victim. The author of the sadistic scenario, he or she is the author and interpreter of the victim’s response. The age of sadomasochism puts all the importance on the alleged pleasure of the victim: her acceptance of the sadist’s rule of force used against her, her supposed pleasure in it. The distinctive feature of contemporary pornography is the lascivious smile on the represented woman’s face, saying how she welcomes, how she likes and desires her sexual subordination and exploitation. Here, the pleasure of sadism no longer just derives from the victim’s cries of pain under torture, but from her cries of lust under the same vexation. As Roland Barthes put it years ago:

The scene is the victim’s mark; she makes herself a victim because she chooses to scream; if under the same vexation she were to ejaculate, she would cease to be a victim, would be transformed into a libidinous: ‘to scream and ejaculate,’ this paradigm is the beginning of choice, as of Sattine meaning.

(Stade, Foucalt, Lévi-Strauss, p 147)

It remains sadism, however, because it is in her scream of lust and her bodily discharge in response to the vexation of violation, which we understand as force used against her will. Only her body is now being mobilised against herself, against her will. While this is nothing new in the realm of sadomasochism, indeed, nothing new in the experience of women, what is new is the concerted intellectual effort to declare the body as the site of truth. While women’s bodies are being played off against their minds — as we know them played off in every romance, we, as the watching empire of this drama, judge where the woman truly resides: in her body rather than her mind. Once her body has spoken through its discharge, expressed its ‘pleasure’ as physiological reaction, we proceed to read this as the woman’s will, her consent to the vexation which produced it.

Locating truth in the body

Thus women’s collective political objection to pornography as a practice in society dwindle to a lot, at best a self-deception, in the face of physiological response. Even where a woman may report having experienced a physiological reaction against her will — for example in being raped — a reaction which distresses and upsets her, all her expressions as a conscious thinking intelligent and political being are deemed irrelevant compared to what is defined as her — or her body’s — ‘pleasure’ or expression of the body, its apparently marvellous autonomy has become the ultimate truth, as if it had nothing to do with culture, as if it put the lie to the mind. In this, it has become the locus where the true self resides.

Thus Carol Clover writes in her introduction to the anthology Dirty Looks: ‘Women, Pornography, Power:

There is something questionable about the way pornography can move our bodies, even when we don’t want it to and even if we don’t approve of the images that make it happen. (3)

And she adds in parentheses:

If the unconscious were a politically correct place, it would need to be unsexed.

The unconscious apparently is the body, or the body its direct expression, which comes down to the same thing. For just before, she argued that ‘we are in general suspicious of forms (including music and dance forms) that aim themselves so directly at the body’. There is no theory here about any interaction between consciousness and the unconscious, of any dialectic between the physical and the psychological: there is only a direct aim at the body, bypassing the mind. What a person may think on reflection, on political and philosophical grounds concerning, for instance, pornography is of no consequence when their body speaks. Their body is a case which their mind inhabits, a mind which had better learn to think as its body dictates. This is the very message pornography and pro-pornography theory puts across.

Hence we are hardly surprised that the public performer, Annie Sprinkle, is said to have ‘stayed with, and unabashedly (to inhabit) her own pornographic body’ (3). Not only could she apparently have chosen to leave it, refusing to stay with it, but it is not just her own body she thus inhabits, it is her own ‘pornographic’ body.

Thus academic feminists advocating pornography not only advocate the old dualistic position of a mind in the encasings of a body, they also uphold all the other patriarchal dualisms — insisting on the duality of sex, on the badness of ‘girls’ devoted to it, evidenced in the abundance of titles about ‘Dirty Looks’ and ‘Bad Girls’. Bad girls is also what researcher Loreta Loach calls the women she spoke to who enjoy pornography: ‘they are the hidden participants in the porn controversy, the transgressors, the bad girls who refuse to be repressed by politics’ (206). The only difference to the patriarchal of the nineteenth century is that today, it counts as the peak of radical chic to be “bad” and to talk “dirty”. While this has the ring of adolescent rebellion against the stern moral authorities of parents and church fathers, it nevertheless has more serious political implications than such rebellion might suggest.

The body in fascism

For the body plays a crucial role also in the thinking of the new Right, especially their theorising of ethnicity and culture as being inscribed in the body (not to mention their unpremature theorising of sex as biological). Thus we may read in ‘The Republic’, the party organ of the German ultra-right Republicans:

The intuitive and emotional bond to one’s own people, however, can develop only if we are born into that people, raised among that people, thus being able from the beginning to identify with it. In other words, if one has cultivated belonging to that people, as it were, with the mother’s milk. A Turk or a Nigerian does not simply become a German by being given a German passport. Because of the effectiveness of this inner bond he remains at heart what he always was: a Turk or a Nigerian. Only in exceptional cases may he detach himself — and even then only certain parts of his being — to become a German. (cit Helldr, p 16)

In other words, his body, saturated with the mother’s milk of his culture and ethnicity, was raised among his people and on their territory, remains the true repository of his ethnicity, no matter what he does learn, acquires in his life as a person. He may even get to know German culture better than a German who was raised in it, having consciously acquired and studied it — yet what is of interest and consequence in his ‘being’, that is, his body. A body which is the repository of culture and ethnicity, as the gendered body in the examples above is the repository of the sexual unconscious and the self.

Not that one would want to argue that someone studying German culture would thereby become a German, come to be a German. The point is, rather, that there is no concept of humans other than as originary ethnic communities. Thus a further theorisation of the ultraright explains the ‘nature’ of ethnic species:

Everybody knows that a bitch may not be explored by the dock. If anything, it is she which grows there. The bitch is a true of the North, ‘capable’ only on the basis of the environment there. Goethe has shown... how the indigent plant has developed quite differently depending on the soil, the climate and other environmental influences... should it be different in the world of humans?... Natural scientists speaking the language of our times talk of races and types, tribes and peoples. Like the species of plants and animals, they are a fait de nature, which is no bar for us to judge, but to accept. (Werner Hennemann, in Europa, cit Helldr, p 55)

In other words, there is a concerted intellec
tual effort under way that attempts to locate the self back in the body — in the body as biologi
cal or bio-cultural fact. Everything else is but the superficial trimmings of a mind trying to disguise the truth of the body — an acquired foreign culture belying the truth of ethnicity, a consciousness mind negating the body’s truth. Its purpose is to deal with bodies according to their nature, deporting them to where nature designed them: Turks to Turkey, Nigers to Nigeria, native women for the sexual purposes for which Nature has so aptly equipped them.

Primo Levi writes in his account of being a prisoner in Auschwitz: ‘there we learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is in much greater danger than our life.’ (cit in Mench, p 63)

We may learn to tear our injuries to our bodies, but what in being done to us as persons — the violation of our person — is a peril different from the physical threat to kill our body. It is a danger which once again is being made invisible by a theory which insists on equating self with body, reducing the self to the body, to whom can happen only what happens to their body.
Banned for Blasphemy: The Rape of Sita

Last year, Lindsey Collen's novel The Rape of Sita was banned by the government in Mauritius, and she has since been subject to threats of death and public rape. There has however been a considerable response from the international feminist community, and the book has also been awarded the Commonwealth Literature Award 'Best Book for Africa 1994'. Tess Rumble & Joan Scanlon met her when she was in London recently at a meeting hosted by the Asian Women Writer's Collective, and asked her to respond to some questions in writing.

Joan Scanlon: Could you say a little about the general context in which you are working, and the political and economic situation in Mauritius?

Lindsey Collen: Mauritius has been built up by the IMF and the World Bank, from 1979-1998 onwards, as a kind of showpiece to demonstrate the 'success' of these banks' loan strategies and structural adjustment programmes. There is today full employment to 'prove' the 'success' which is often boasted of as being 'the Mauritian miracle'.

The myth of the Mauritian 'miracle'

There are all sorts of ironies involved. Firstly, of course, Mauritius is no 'miracle' as is claimed. To give an example: government housing programmes for workers — which permitted the poor a form of dignity in the lean years of the one-crop sugar cane economy — have been scrapped in these times of the supposed 'miracle'. After the last cyclone on 10 February 1994, instead of the government providing housing as it has since 1960 onwards after every cyclone, it failed to provide housing for the poorest families hundreds of whom were left homeless, later to be hounded out of refugee centres. Subsidies on basic foods have been completely removed, leaving prices to 'market forces', and now the government is talking about introducing fees for some of the health services, of not paying pensions until people are 65 years old (instead of 60) and of means-testing these pensions.

New forms of slavery

Secondly, the entire country has become one big free zone factory area, where a high level of exploitation of workers is 'freely' permitted, and where hours are long, overtime is compulsory, factory closures are frequent and freedoms for workers severely curbed. For example, quite often workers are made to sign an undertaking (which, incidentally, is illegal) to the effect that they will not join a union. Casual employment has become rife. Workers often refer to the new forms of exploitation as being equivalent to a new kind of slavery and indenture, to replace the old forms under French and British colonial rule, respectively.

The 'privilege' of protectionism

Thirdly, to make a mockery of the propaganda about the 'miracle of liberalisation', all the appearances of success, and even all the genuine economic activity, are a direct result not of the liberalisation they pretend to result from, but of protectionist measures that Mauritius has been privileged by: a guaranteed sugar quota and minimum sugar price, quotas for textiles into EEC and US markets, as well as a host of projects of all kinds to support the 'miracle', so that it can be used as a showpiece. In addition, Mauritius has benefited a great deal from capital leaving Hong Kong when the British colonial set up is about to close down, and coming to Mauritius — a conjunctural boon, to say the least.

The war on wages

Fourthly, it is also clear that in a country like Mauritius, which has no indigenous population on any of its islands, and no history of a peasantry, we are all condemned to the cash nexus, and have no illusion of being able to 'return' to a real or even imaginary 'rural areas' that we 'came from' somewhere, sometime in the past. This has tended to make it easier for the capitalist classes to exploit us through the free zone method. But of course, with full employment, workers have more bargaining power — which has had an effect, even though this has been used more on an individual basis (shopping around for a higher wage) than through joining the union movement — and wages have gone up. As soon as wages increased, workers from abroad (from China, Sri Lanka, India, South Africa and Madagascar) have been brought in to work here on a contract basis, often under draconian conditions. And capital has been moved out to places where wages are lower.

I work in a context where there have been very few voices to criticize the kind of 'development' that has represented this 'miracle'. My voice is amongst these few voices.

A modern-day Sita

Tess Rumble: Could you tell us something about your book? What is the story of The Rape of Sita?

Lindsey: I think it's one story but with lots of stories in it — layering heavily on the oral tradition of the story-teller having to respond to questions from the audience. These questions provoke narratives, which are meant both to distract from, and enhance, the main narrative. The main story is that of Sita, a modern-day woman, remembering the rape she suffered eight years previously.

Joan: When was it banned and what were the official reasons for that? What do you think the real reasons were?

Lindsey: The book was attacked by the Prime Minister in the National Assembly on 7th December 1995, exactly four days after publication. He called on the police to take action against the book. The official reason he gave was that the novel is, if judged by its cover, supposedly blasphemous. In fact there are no anti-blasphemy laws in Mauritius. The Prime Minister also said that the novel may constitute an outrage against public and religious morality. If it were found to be so it would be illegal, because it is an offense under section 206 of the Criminal Code. The real reason is probably that the government thought it could make some political mileage by getting some support from the fundamentalists who were being hysterical about the book; or at least that the Prime Minister was preventing the Opposition from getting mileage from his silence.

Tess: Was there hostility towards the book before it was banned that led to the government taking this action?
Fighting for free speech

Lindsey: Since the attack by the government against the book, a very broad-based support has built up for the right to freedom of expression, and I have been constantly touched by and, more importantly, protected from physical violence by, increasingly open support for me. In Mauritius, other than the Chief Editors, who were themselves silenced in their editorials, almost every single journalist in a position to take a position, has supported me. Almost every woman in the country supports me, and in addition to the women’s group I’m in myself (Muvman Liberasyon Fam) which actually looked after me on a day to day basis whenever necessary, other women’s organisations and individual women have again and again stood by me when I am under attack. Writers of all kinds have been openly supportive, literally creating occasions to take a stand in favour of freedom of expression. In the trade union movement there has been clear solidarity. Politically I am in a party called LALIT (which means ‘struggle’), which has constantly worked towards gaining ground and not losing any, in the battle we have on our hands against the double enemy: the fundamentalists and the state.

Language hierarchy

Joan: What is the significance of your book being written in English, and who was your intended readership?

Lindsey: The language situation in Mauritius is unusual. The official language and the language of schooling is English, but French is the language of the elite and also of the press. The language that everyone speaks in Kreol. Kreol is an efficient language that has continued to grow and become by far the most important language in Mauritius. The controversy about it is not written much. It has been written for over a hundred years, but colonial prejudice to the effect that it is not a language persists, and the authorities actively discourage Kreol in education and the media. I am active in a movement to promote Kreol, and I write a lot in Kreol. I have not written a novel in Kreol, though. It would take immense powers of imagination — to create at one and the same time a whole novel and a readership in a language. But I’d like to be able to do it one day.

I was writing for anyone in Mauritius who can understand English, that is all literate people in the country — but I also hope in mind English-language readers everywhere else in the world.

Tess: What is likely to happen in relation to the book?

Lindsey: At the moment we are waiting for a reply from the Director of Public Prosecutions to a letter from me asking whether there are any prosecutions in store for me, and asking whether there will be if the book is brought out onto the shelves again. At the same time The Rape of Sita will, in all probability, be published internationally in 1995, and then be available everywhere in the world — maybe even in Mauritius too.

Joan: What kind of women’s liberation movement activism is there in Mauritius? How much international networking/support is there for women activists in Mauritius? How does what’s happened to your book relate to this?

Lindsey: Mauritius has a vibrant women’s movement — over 500 associations, all with feminist ideas, all active enough to be a constant pressure on government to improve legislation. The association I am a member of (and this year president of) is the oldest national women’s organisation and is very militant on all subjects of concern to women. In particular, we have constantly fought for improved laws and attitudes on violence against women, including rape (and since the appearance of the book, and the controversy about it, rape has for the first time been outlawed within marriage); we have always fought for legal abortion and this has often meant open contacts with the Catholic church hierarchy; we have opposed very thoroughly the so-called ‘personal law’ which allows anti-woman marriage and divorce laws for people marrying under Muslim law; we have fought for demilitarisation, especially in the context of the US base on Diego Garcia, and for the reorganisation of the entire archipelago which the British and USA ‘depopulated’ and severed from the rest of Mauritius as an illegal pre-Independence ‘deal’ before turning it into a military base.

International solidarity

Over the banning of The Rape of Sita we have received massive support from women’s groups and women’s organisations the world over — Africa, Latin America, USA, Germany, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the Middle East, Australia, India and Pakistan and the Caribbean. (Curiously we seem so far to be in networks worldwide not including UK women’s groups; however I have been clearly, openly and efficiently supported by PEN, Article XIX and Index on Censorship, all of which are UK-based. And during my recent visit, and through women in PEN, I have met and started links with some women’s groups in London, which we will hopefully develop together.)

Tess: What kind of change do you think is possible, and how do you think this can be achieved?

Lindsey: I think that the battle against fundamentalism and repression is a long, hard one that has to be won. There are not many short-cuts really, and the political struggle for enlightenment, for equality and for real democracy in all aspects of life, including at the place of work, are of course, what we need to organise towards.

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Letters ........................................................................................................ 2
Just Say No: The Empire of Assertiveness  Debbie Cameron takes issue with assertiveness training .................................................. 8
Unfair Play  Sex testing of women in sport by Mariah Burton-Nelson .......................................................................................... 14
The Black Women's Movement in Brazil  Alzira Rufino ............................................. 21
Development, Ecology and Feminism  Sue Lamb reviews two recent books .................................................................................. 23
It All Comes Out in the Wash: Lesbians in Soaps  Nicki Hastie ......................... 31
Queer Thcorhea (and what it all might mean for feminists)  Catherine Grant ....................................................................................... 37
Stack in the Middle  Liz Kelly on the need for feminist praxis ....................... 44
One Hell of a Trip  Louise Armstrong ................................................................ 49
Exchanging Feminist Words  Catharine MacKinnon talks with Joan Scanlon ..................................................................................... 56
Statement by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin regarding Canadian Customs and Legal Approaches to Pornography .................................................. 64
Feminine Charms and Outrageous Arms  Fen Coles looks at women bodybuilders ........................................................................... 66
From Sexual Politics to Body Politics  Susanne Kappeler ................................ 73
Banned for Blasphemy: The Rape of Sita  Lindsey Colleen discusses her novel with Joan Scanlon and Tess Rumble ......................... 80

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