

of impersonality or a sense of public activity, the utter demandingness—all these echo a mother-daughter relationship in which the terrible, hidden truth is not that our mothers are strong, but that they are very weak. The complaint, “You are so strong and I am so helpless” hides the far worse one, “I am strong enough that my strength will get me into terrible trouble, and you are too weak to protect me if that happens.”

For all oppressed people strength and success are double-edged: heartbreakingly desirable and very dangerous. But to “risk winning” (Phyllis Chesler’s phrase from *Women and Madness*, a book to which I owe many of the ideas in this piece) is the only way out of oppression.

“Successful” feminists aren’t immune to this terror of power; all the women I know feel it. We take the risk anyway. That’s the only secret, not some fantastic, illusory power-fame-and-glory that some women have and others don’t. I recently heard a conversation between two Lesbians, one of whom was living openly as such and one of whom was afraid to leave her marriage. The married one said, “I can’t leave my husband because I’m not brave, like you.” To which the other (who had left *her* husband only two years before) said, “Don’t give me that. I was just as scared as you when I left my marriage, but I did it anyway. *That’s what made me brave.*”

The MM/TS polarity is illusory. Both are positions in the same belief system. Both are engaged in ritually sacrificing the possibility of a woman’s being effective on her own behalf, not needy and ineffective, not effective and altruistic, but *effective for herself*.

It’s selfish, vicious, and nasty, and will cause everyone within a thousand miles to faint flat.

But it beats being dead.

Being Against Pornography

MAYBE SOME WOMEN CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN pornography and erotica at a single glance.

I can’t.

Three or four years ago I would have agreed 100% with the anti-pornography activists, but since then I’ve been through a long process of examining my own impulses, talking to other women, giving the subject as much thought and analysis as I can, and trying as much as possible to relate all this information to my personal history—which is by no means a painless one, truly.

In short, I’ve been consciousness-raising (with other women) not simply saying “We know what hurts us” which—when applied to male-oriented pornography—means, “This is *my* unexplored, unanalyzed reaction to *your* fantasies.”

And what I found was rather unsettling.

In the fifties, when I was an adolescent, my young, female, artist-intellectual friends and I associated (as one might expect) with young, male, artist-intellectuals. They were, without exception, on the side of beauty, freedom, and unconventionality (we knew this because they told us so) and they often lectured us that we, too, should be the same—which meant putting out for them. Remember, this was long before abortion was safe and legal.* It was also still a time in which men could pull sex-rank on women merely by “talking dirty,” or mentioning sex without the obligatory bow to “romance” or indicating that they were sexually experienced. Because they were “free” and we were not, because nobody validated our (perfectly correct) perceptions that sex, even without pregnancy, was far more dangerous for us, socially and psychologically, than it was for them, we had no rebuttal for this rather nasty kind of egotism. We could say that we didn’t like that sort of talk—but to act “prudish” or “ladylike” was to accept the very social values that we ourselves were trying so hard to escape. We *couldn’t* be “feminine” *and* also human (that is, free artist-intellectuals, which is what we wanted so very much to be) but if we dared to throw away the protection (and suffocation) of the double standard, we faced the obligation (which nobody doubted) of being sexually “free” since female sexual vulnerability was the very reason (so we were told) women were inferior to men and couldn’t be artists.

The mass media said exactly the same thing—the choice was either marriage (which was normal) or celibacy (which showed that you were crazy) or “free” sexuality—which not only showed you were crazy but also killed you, probably *via* abortion.

That was why no woman had ever been a great artist, because she could not be “free” and therefore could not write about the really important subjects, which were (of

course) male camaraderie, fist fights, bullfighting—and “free” sexuality.

Today this looks like a pretty transparent con job (marry and be subhuman, stay celibate and go mad, be promiscuous and die of abortion) but in the fifties it was backed up by everything we knew. The choice was either to admit that we were inferior beings (which was intolerable) or to take the most appalling risks to prove that we could play the male games in the male way (likewise).

Lesbianism as a way out? But that was even more out of the question. Lesbianism was an abnormality even more ghastly and inevitably punished than abortion.

Nonetheless there was still one choice left. Since at least the 19th century women in our position had been trading off sexuality for humanity. (I suspect such a bargain was and still is very widespread.) And that is just what we did.

I remember very vividly being caught between two anxieties: that I was doing sex “wrong” (everyone else knew how and I didn’t) and that sex itself was somehow “wrong,” that is, unworkable.

Naturally I did my best to stick with the latter idea. I was (and my friends were) much more like the suburban housewives we felt so superior to than any of us knew. All of us ended up in the one position that could guard us against the feeling that our sexuality (which usually didn’t “work”; see the Kinsey report) *was* our inferiority. On the contrary, it was just because we were incapable of impersonal or casual sex that we were superior to men and our superiority was moral.

This is the Harlequin Romance solution. Casual sex is morally defective; those who have sex only as one aspect of a Great Love are morally superior to those who do not. Sex is love. Proper, good, female sex transcends the physical and is thereby personal and sacred; impersonal, appetitive sex is male and a sign of depravity.

Sound familiar?

It's this belief that enables good Fundamentalist Christian ladies to condemn homosexuality *and* recreational sex *and* pornography *and* prostitution *and* S & M as identical sins and to believe that people corrupt enough to indulge in any one of them are capable of all vileness and baseness. It's this belief that enabled a Lesbian reader of the *Gay Community News* to condemn S & M as insulting to women forced into prostitution and women experiencing genital mutilation, then to somehow identify all three as identical evils, and to end her letter, "If there is a decent dyke left in this world, contact us!"² I've read a Lesbian review of *The Joy Of Lesbian Sex* which said (in obvious upset) that most of us don't have such a "cold attitude" to our bodies.³ I met a Phyllis Schafly-esque Iron-Maiden-of-the-Christian-Right in the women's conference at Boulder, Colorado who also believed that sex for sex's sake was evil. And we know that N.O.W. has disdainfully detached itself from issues like boy-love and S & M, while accepting homosexuality as a political issue, even though the same principle of choice is involved in all three.

Bitterness and envy lie behind this belief, an experience of intolerable coercion, and the profound conviction, at some level, that we really are inferior to men and that things will never be otherwise.

What does all of this have to do with the movement against pornography?

Well, when *Take Back The Night*⁴ appeared in our local bookstore, I bought it eagerly and took it home with great pleasure. But after several readings, I found myself (like Deirdre English in her essay in *Mother Jones*⁵) not so much in disagreement with it as profoundly uneasy. Yes, pornography is a feminist issue, I guess. Yes, there's plenty of violence against women. Yes, women are sexually exploited.

But—

If erotica was different from porn, why didn't the writers give examples of erotica that got *them* excited? (They don't.)

If (as some said) they were attacking only violence and not sex *per se*, why on earth weren't they attacking TV cop shows and Hollywood movies like *Apocalypse Now*? Why, if they were attacking violence, did the vast majority of titles (both essays and books) say "pornography"?⁶

Why did some of those who wanted to ban pornography make light of the civil rights arguments? Why did some of them scoff at the idea that such a ban could possibly be turned against feminist material?⁷ (The historical evidence is all the other way.)

Why did those who only wanted pornography kept out of sight still speak of it as extremely dangerous?⁸ (If it's that bad, merely putting it under the counter is a mighty feeble remedy.)

Why were we perpetually told that this, that, or the other was *on the rise* when there was no evidence whatsoever of a rise and even some evidence against? Laura Lederer's introduction to *Take Back The Night* mentions "increasing amounts of pornography" in the same paragraph that she says that violence against women "has been assumed for so long."⁹ (Italics mine.) Florence Rush is quoted as saying that the ideal of femininity "is fast becoming the infantilized woman" (italics mine) without any mention of the nineteenth century's ideal baby-woman. Then she herself speaks of 19th century child prostitution.¹⁰ Helen Longino speaks of the "growing acceptance of non-human nouns . . . to refer to women" (italics mine) with such snappy modernisms as "doll" and "skirt." She also lists "fuck" under the rubric of "verbs of harm."¹¹ Robin Morgan speaks of the "recent and horrifying rise in the rate of marital violence" (italics mine) giving as her source Del Martin's *Battered Wives*, which cites an increase for one city, Boston (for which the

figures are incomplete) and does not compare year with year for any other place.¹²

It's one thing to point out the significance of scientific and social neglect of a topic. It's quite another to make your figures up. In fact, considering the social position of women in the U.S. and Europe fifty or one hundred or in Europe five hundred years ago and considering the laws about wife-battering that are actually on the books for those eras, it's quite impossible that the rate should have gone up, or even (perhaps) stayed the same. Wife-battering, now a hidden and neglected crime, was once open, legal, and openly encouraged.

Why does nobody know (and most don't seem to care) who uses pornography and what kinds of pornography—are there divisions by class, age, race, income, different media, etc.?

Why have not the articles critical of the anti-pornography activists appeared in the feminist media? Of course I may have missed some, but so far I have found such material only in other publications (John D'Emilio in *Christopher Street*,¹³ Deirdre English in *Mother Jones*,¹⁴ Pat Califia in *The Advocate*¹⁵ and *Co-evolution Quarterly*.¹⁶)

Why does Susan Griffin give us, as a feminist ideal of sexuality, the great love of (hold on to your hats) Tristan and Iseult?* (Doesn't anyone remember the early feminist movement's condemnation of romantic love?) Two other positive statements are by Sanford and Donovan, in *Family Circle*, that "real sex is the most personal and loving of expressions,"¹⁷ and Laura Lederer quotes from Elizabeth Cady Stanton (in a letter to Susan B. Anthony in 1853), "Man in his lust has regulated long enough the whole question of sexual intercourse. Now let the mother of mankind, whose prerogative it is to set bounds to his indulgence, rise up and give this whole matter a thorough, fearless examina-

* Who die for love, remember the *liebestod*?

tion."¹⁸ (Italics added. Those last two would certainly rejoice the Moral Majority!)

Why is there so little political and economic analysis in this material and so much horrified indignation? Susan Griffin's attempt at analysis is the most subtle and complex of all, and she ends up telling us that the cause of pornography is "the pornographic mind" (italics mine)—a constant throughout history though located in nobody's head in particular, which creates pornography as a way to cope with its "schizoid split" which is, as far as I can tell, uncaused or merely the human condition. All these phenomena (the schizoid split, the pornographic mind, and pornography) occur in an abstract realm where economics, population pressure, technology, ecology, even history, don't exist. Kathleen Barry (in *Female Sexual Slavery*¹⁹) attempts no feminist analysis at all—which means that the reader's experience of atrocity after atrocity is unrelieved by any notion of what to do to change things or any idea of what causes such Godawful events other than male original sin.

Women Against Pornography and Violence in the Media sent a slide lecturer to Seattle a few years ago. Her talk made me uneasy, since her examples of pornography were mostly non-violent, some of them dubious as pornography at all, and when questioned she said that non-violent pornography degraded women because it showed us as sexual objects. Does no one remember the early '70s objection against women being shown as sex objects *because that was all we were allowed to be*?

Why is there so little talk about sex and so little knowledge? Are men (or women) "imprinted" at certain periods in their lives with certain sexual cues, to which they respond thereafter? Is S & M identical with real cruelty or is it something totally different? (I vote for the latter.) I hear that in S & M most men (like most women) want to be the "bottom," not the top; what does this do to theories

that S & M is identical with violence?

Why does nobody discuss female pornography? Haven't they noticed *Sweet Savage Yum* in the supermarket alongside the vegetable bin? On the other side is *Tremulous Love* and next to that is *He Busted Her Bodice*, all three just as self-serving and just as ritualized and the 1st and 3rd just as explicit as any male masturbatory fantasy.

Why does nobody pair an anti-pornography stance with an insistence that children have sexual rights, including the right to technical know-how, the right to privacy, and the right to public encouragement of whatever they want to do, whether hetero, homo, solo, or non? And by children I mean not only adolescents but children of nine and six and three?

Why does nobody investigate the history of pornography? So much depends on the printing press and the isolation of middle-class people, especially women, in that other new invention, The Home. Perhaps what we're seeing now is a "democratization" of pornography²⁰; what used to be available in Europe only to well-to-do men (and before that, the male aristocracy) is now available to working-class men—and women, only our pornography is a smaller business and less bold—just like everything else meant for women only!

— Why the anti-pornography movement? *Why just now?*

Put the socialization I described earlier (which has been around for some time) together with the political frustration of the last few years, the stagnation of feminist theory (among middle-class white women, at least), a retreat into the "decency issues" which the whole community must at least pretend to honor, and you will end up with something very like what we have now.

I think there are parallels that can be drawn between today's anti-pornography movement and the 19th century Temperance movement. Men did drink up their wages and

beat and starve their wives. By pinpointing Demon Rum as the central issue, reformers could avoid the real (and dangerous) ones like women's position in marriage and women's lack of economic autonomy, thus keeping a crusader's self-respect while avoiding a radical's punishment. (The members of the W.C.T.U. may have been laughed at, but it was the members of the W.S.P.U. who were jailed and force-fed.) The liquor interests fought female suffrage in the belief that women would vote the country dry. They were right, too: Prohibition was voted in—and it did nothing except make bootleggers' fortunes!

Something of the same sort is happening now. As a friend of mine says, a lot of women are being driven from feminism to femininism, which means *If I can't have it, you can't have it* and *At least don't rub my nose in it*.

And yet there's really something wrong with using pornography, isn't there? Something tacky, something cheap, something thoughtless, egotistical, and harmful?

No.

Now I'm going to bed. There's a vampire film on TV that's full of violence, obvious sadism, tons of gore, and the most stereotyped gender roles imaginable. In fact, the whole business is very S & M and enough to turn a feminist's stomach.

Not mine.

As you read this I'll be passive and helpless and vaguely yearning, leaning out of a turret window in my sexy, busty, low-cut peignor, brushing my long, lovely, feminine hair and waiting for Him.

Guess why!

NOTES

1. Marge Piercy's *Braided Lives* (New York: Summit), 1982, describes such a milieu very well.
2. Marcia Womongold, letter, *Gay Community News*, April 10, 1982, p. 5.
3. Laurie Dale, "The Snatch," Pandora, February 1979.
4. Laura Lederer, *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow and Company), 1980.
5. Deirdre English, "The Politics of Porn: Can Feminists Walk The Line?" *Mother Jones*, April 1980.
6. Lederer's *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*; Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Perigee), 1981; Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row), 1981; Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Ellen Donovan, "What Women Should Know About Pornography," *Family Circle*, February 1981, and Alice Walker, "When Women Fight Pornography at Home" (the title seems to be that of Ms. in which the essay first appeared in February, 1980; in *TBTN* the same piece is entitled "Coming Apart"). In *TBTN*, out of 35 pieces, 22 use "pornography" as part of their titles. Of the remainder, 6 make it clear in the first few sentences that pornography is their subject.
7. *TBTN*, Diana E.H. Russell and Laura Lederer, "Questions We Get Asked Most Often," p. 29. Also *Op. Cit.*, p. 29, and Helen E. Longino, "What Is Pornography?" pp. 51-53.
8. For example, Susan Brownmiller, *TBTN*, "Let's Put Pornography Back In The Closet," p. 252.
9. *TBTN*, p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-79.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
13. John D'Emilio, "Women Against Pornography," *Christopher Street*, May 1980.
14. See footnote 5.
15. Pat Califia, "Among Us, Against Us—The New Puritans," *The Advocate*, April 17, 1981.
16. Califia, "Feminism and Sadoomasochism," *Co-evolution Quarterly*, No. 33, Spring 1981.
17. Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Ellen Donovan, "What Women Should Know About Pornography," February 1981.
18. *TBTN*, p. 21.
19. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: Avon), 1979.
20. Daniel Eisenberg, "Toward a Bibliography of Erotic Pulp," *Journal of Popular Culture*, XV:4, Spring 1982, p. 175.

News From The Front

LAST TUESDAY I WAS IN MY LOCAL HARDWARE STORE, PRICING chickenwire to cover my petunias. The typewriter at our local women's center had acquired the habit of being stolen—I was trying to do something about this too—and I must have seemed too enthusiastic about the nuts, bolts, and chains, for a young woman in blue jeans and T-shirt gave me the most disapproving look I've ever received in my life, and I could not imagine why until I came home to find the June issue of *off our backs* on my doorstep and a pile of other publications, all about what I will call (to be equally unfair to both sides) the Great PP Controversy or the "Puritans" vs. the "Perverts."

I must admit that my first reaction was to be sympathetic to the Perverts. Particularly irritating was the Puritans' apparent lack of theory—but as I read on it occurred to me that the Puritan side was indeed operating on a theory,

Joanna Russ

***Magic
Mommias,
Trembling
Sisters,
Puritans &
Perverts***

Feminist Essays

1985



The Crossing Press / Trumansburg, New York 14886

The Crossing Press Feminist Series