Lesbian Porn Stories: Rebellion and/or Resistance?

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Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many lesbians active in queer politics seemed to take up the banner of sexual liberation. Lesbians began to produce pornography by and for lesbians and lesbian bars began to feature erotic dancers and strip shows. Sex toy stores began to spring up in San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, and New York, and lesbian sex conferences as well as parties became common. Sexual desire and dynamics became more visible—lesbian sadomasochists began to claim a public voice and space, and butch-femme sexual roles enjoyed a public renaissance.

This burgeoning lesbian sex industry providing more forums for lesbian sexual expression is the backdrop for many lesbians when engaged in the feminist debates over the politics of the pornography industry. Feminists who focus on the inequalities and violence produced through pornography’s production, consumption, and distribution are often in direct conflict with those who advocate women’s rights to sexual expression and freedom, including the right to express sexualized power dynamics and to have access to pornographic products and services. Lesbian and gay pornography is a pivotal point of contention in feminist debates. Many feel torn between a feminist analysis of white male power and domination evidenced in the mass industry of pornography and an individual rights approach to sexual expression and practice through pornographic commodities. Many lesbians are hesitant to publicly criticize sexual practices in pornography because of the continuing struggle to legitimize the sexual lives of lesbians in the larger heterosexist and homophobic society. Many lesbian sex radicals and anticensorship feminists do not believe there is a connection between the industries of pornography and social systems of inequality and sexual violence. Many consume pornographic images and stories produced by the sex industries. They perceive sexual expression and practice to be individual choices and preferences, rather than social constructions tied to broader systems of unequal social power. Moreover, given the stigma attached to lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexual identities, some
argue that the sexual expression of gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities must be protected from social critique so as not to contribute to persecution. Finally, some believe that the feminist analysis of pornography inhibits women’s exploration of sexual practices and is therefore antithetical to liberation and freedom.  

Pat Califia’s essay entitled “Among Us, Against Us: The New Puritans,” was key in the early 1980s in framing the perspective of lesbian sex radicals. She begins the essay with her personal history of being titillated since she was a kid by sexy images and stories that had sadomasochistic dynamics. Califia claims that eroticism is individual, natural, and inevitable, and therefore must be defended from critical analysis. She writes: “The inner voice of eros is arbitrary, bizarre, impeccably honest, bountiful and so powerful as to be cruel. It takes courage to hear its demands and follow them.”  

She argues that pornography has been essential to the development of her sexual desire because in the broader society this desire is stigmatized and punished. Since sexual expression is a matter of individual desire, she perceives the feminist critique of the sexual dynamics constructed in pornography as an attack on individual women’s sexual identities, desires, and practices, rather than a critique of a commercial industry. Sex radicals, like Califia, connect antipornography feminist politics to ongoing sexual repression and persecution of sexual minority communities. Thus, sex radicals often link feminist critical analyses of the pornography industry with intolerant, antisezial, and puritanical attitudes and public policies. 

Feminists and lesbians who defend the pornography industry often make the slippery slope argument that the critical analysis of pornography feeds into repressive and punitive attacks on gay and lesbian sexual expression. They fear that any critical attention to sexually explicit material will be used selectively against gay and lesbian peoples. This argument has had a lot of potency among lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men in general because it has been true. The right wing continues to have a moralistic and repressive focus on gay and lesbian sexual identities and practices. This bigoted focus creates a dilemma for those of us who are both critical of the mass industry of pornography and its practices of inequality and who are also supportive of the sexual rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities. The stigma, hatred, and violence directed against the sexual identities and practices of gay men and lesbians are realities that cannot be ignored. Right wing politicians, like Jesse Helms, do target gay, lesbian, and bisexual materials, often ignoring the mass industry of white male heterosexual pornography. The repercussions are significant. As Califia warns, “People would have even less access to information about sex and erotic material than they do now.”  

The heterosexism and homophobia of right wing antipornography campaigns, we believe, must be confronted and denounced, not ignored. In fact, feminists challenging pornography industries
must critically denounce the homophobia and bigotry associated with right wing campaigns, as well as their sexism and misogyny.

The sex radicals, however, do not simply defend pornography; they promote lesbian pornography as a radical impulse against public authority and repression. Lesbian sex radicals argue that for too long women have been defined by our sexuality and that it is time that we define it for ourselves. Pornography, they argue, offers a space to explore sexuality as a source of women’s power as opposed to our victimization. Lesbian sex magazines proliferate in the 80s and 90s—On Our Backs and Bad Attitude are the most prominent. Lesbian pornographers seek to create a lesbian dialect that is bold, hot, and speaks to lesbian sexual desires and needs. Lesbian pornography differs from representations of “girl-girl” sex so prevalent in heterosexual men’s pornography in that it speaks to lesbians not to white heterosexual men. The publishers of On Our Backs claim that lesbians portraying their own sexuality for lesbians is a radical act. Lisa Henderson, for instance, argues that lesbian pornographic images not only “transgress anti-porn feminist orthodoxy and the heterosexual mainstream, they also expose, demystify and affirm precisely that part of lesbianism that is so threatening: we take our place among women through sexual and political desire, and in the process declare some resistance to heterosexist and patriarchal cultural scripts.”

Lesbian pornography presents women as powerful, desiring subjects, according to Susie Bright, co-founder and one-time editor of On Our Backs. She declares that pornography has to be seized by those who are disenfranchised by it.

The women who produce lesbian pornography claim that it is radical and transformative because lesbians are visible as active sexual subjects. Jill Dolan, a theater theorist, argues that because lesbian sex is totally excluded from traditional contexts, the most transgressive act imaginable at this point is to represent lesbian sex, especially its excesses. She states, “The explicitness of pornography is a constructive choice for practicing cultural disruptions.” By making sex acts explicit, lesbian pornography disrupts the dominant discourse around sexuality and gender, and makes visible the sexually invisible lesbian. This moves the specifically sexual aspects of lesbian identities, including public expression of lesbian sexual desires and practices, to the forefront of public consciousness. This is more radical than merely presenting a neutral discourse of lesbianism as a sexual preference for a partner of the same sex.

Lesbian producers and consumers of pornography often argue that they are engaging in transgressive sexual practices given that they are lesbians, and not heterosexual men. In contrast, feminists critical of the pornography industry do not presume that women (heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual) will necessarily produce pornography that is transgressive in its construction of sexual desire and dynamics.
Rather, many of us argue that for pornography to be truly transgressive it must challenge existing power structures and dynamics of inequality and must significantly disrupt the sexist, heterosexist, and racist sexual representations of the broader mass culture. Representing women engaged in “taboo” and “deviant” sexual practices and playing out roles that were previously unavailable to women in heterosexual pornography may be transgressive, and yet not socially transformative. Lesbian pornography may simply reinforce dominant discourses of sexualized power and inequality, rather than deconstructing them. The question for feminists critical of pornography is whether lesbians producing lesbian pornography transform normative constructions of sexuality, rather than merely adopting the white male gaze for lesbian consumers.

Sex radicals justify the sexualization of power relations in lesbian pornography on the grounds that it produces sexual pleasure for women, as it does men, and thus must be protected as an individual right. Yet, the uncritical celebration of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexual expression simply on the grounds that it produces sexual pleasure seems problematic from a social justice perspective. As Jenny Kitzinger and Celia Kitzinger suggest, “Sexual excitement cannot be taken as inherently radical nor can our ‘pleasure’ be assumed to be an unproblematic criterion by which to assess images of lesbian sex. Lesbian pleasure is not constructed in a heteropatriarchy-free zone. . . . Taking pleasure in sex scenes which enact power struggles or which play with the symbols of fascism may reflect the measure of our complicity in our own and other people’s oppression.”

In a movement toward social justice, it seems problematic simply to exempt the cultural products and practices of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from social responsibility, especially when it comes to misogyny, racism, classism, and xenophobia, as well as sexual abuse and violence. Open discussion of lesbian and gay sexual representations and practices in terms of respect, equality, and consent can only contribute to the creation of a strong and more just community.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual scholars, educators, and activists must critically consider the social and sexual implications of the growing international sex industry in gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. If sexual desire is being constructed through dynamics of misogyny, racism, classism, and/or xenophobia and mass produced and sold, we must explore the social implications. A critical discussion of the sexual commodities and services being produced and sold by a growing queer pornography industry may feel difficult because of the realities of homophobia and the desire for sexual rights and freedom. The social climate has made many queer-identified women and men defensive of any critical discussion of these issues. While this defensiveness is understandable, activists must not retreat from the discussion. As educators and activists, we don’t believe we should simply accept, minimize, and deny the production of inequalities in the queer sex industry.
just because they are connected to marginalized and demonized sexual identities. The analytic and strategic approach, however, must simultaneously address the forces of homophobia, sexual persecution, in addition to gender, race, and class inequalities, rather than ignore them.

The controversies surrounding the art of Robert Mapplethorpe exemplify the complexities of these debates. Many activists will point to the efforts to prohibit the exhibitions of Mapplethorpe’s work as a prime example of state repression against lesbian and gay sexual expression. It is one of the cases used to warn feminists of the dangers of criticizing any sexual materials. The mainstream gay response to the attack on Mapplethorpe has been to defend him from critical analysis. While censoring efforts and the homophobia underlying them must be resisted, this must not also mean that the artistic sexual representations cannot be critically analyzed from a social justice perspective. For instance, some queer activists have interrogated Mapplethorpe’s representations of Black men as they fit into a tradition of white racism that continues to produce racial inequalities in queer-based social groups and organizations. Essex Hemphill explores the racial implications of Mapplethorpe’s art and its relationship to the failures of the white gay male community to engage equally and respectfully with Black gay men, personally, socially, and politically. He writes:

The white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the plight of black men except as sexual objects. The black male was given very little representation except most often as a big, black dick. This aspect of white gay consciousness is best revealed by the photographs of the late Robert Mapplethorpe on the subject of black males. Though his images may be technically and aesthetically well-composed, what occurs in his work often enough to be of concern is his ability artistically to perpetuate racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality. In some of his images we are only shown parts of the anatomy—genitals, chests, buttocks—close-up and close-cropped to elicit desire. Mapplethorpe’s eye pays special attention to the penis—at the expense of showing us the subject’s face, and thus, a whole person. The penis becomes the identity of the black male which is the classic stereotype recreated and presented as art, as a gay vision. Mapplethorpe’s “Man in a Polyester Suit,” for example, presents a black man without a head, wearing a business suit, his trousers unzipped, and his fat, long penis dangling down, a penis that is not erect. It can be assumed that many viewers appreciative of Mapplethorpe’s work, and those constructing sexual fantasies from it, probably wondered first how much larger would the penis become during erection, as opposed to wondering who is the man in the
photo? Or why is his head missing? What is insulting and endangering to black men on one level is Mapplethorpe’s conscious determination that the faces, heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his black subjects were not as important as close-up shots of their penises. It is virtually impossible to view Mapplethorpe’s photos of black males and avoid confronting issues of exploitation and objectification.9

Most discussions of Mapplethorpe in white dominant lesbigay communities seemed to exclusively focus on the homophobia of the censorship efforts and their ties to the broader right wing antisex campaigns. The defense orchestrated for Mapplethorpe and other gay and lesbian artists contributes to a context where critical analysis is often squelched in the service of protecting lesbigay sexual representations from right wing attacks. While homophobia was and is at play in these censorship efforts, it is not the only issue at stake when considering the social implications of Mapplethorpe’s sexual representations. As Jackie Goldsby points out, “For all the theorizing about censorship, the meaning of Mapplethorpe’s racial aesthetic remained unarticulated in the analysis and protest.”10 The inattention to the reproduction of racialized sexual representations only furthers the racial divides within lesbigay communities.

Questions of unequal power, exploitation, and objectification are significant in movements for social justice, and must not be dismissed on the grounds that they might further societal homophobia. Critical discussion of gay and lesbian sexual representations and their connection to inequalities of race, class, and age within our communities creates the possibilities for equality and mutual respect between us. The purpose of such questions is not to deem sexual materials “good” or “bad,” nor to argue for or against censorship. The purpose is to create a critical discussion about social relations within our communities in the efforts to create a socially just society. It is with such a conversation in mind that we offer the following analysis of lesbian sex stories from On Our Backs of the early 1990s. Our purpose is to contribute to critical discussions of lesbian-created sexual imagery in a social context of interlocking oppressions; our purpose is not to simply condemn or celebrate lesbian pornography. Our hope is to raise critical questions for lesbian and bisexual women’s communities for discussion and dialogue, not to provide absolute answers.

ON OUR BACKS AND THE POLITICS OF LESBIAN PORNOGRAPHY

In the context of the feminist debates over lesbian pornography in the early 1990s, we did an analysis of the fictional stories in On Our Backs. We chose On Our Backs, a lesbian sex magazine produced in San Francisco, because it is a central contender in the debates over lesbian pornography. Published since 1984, at the
height of the feminist sexuality debates, *On Our Backs* advertises itself as “entertainment for the adventurous lesbian” and contrasts itself with the radical feminist newspaper, *off our backs*. Its content described by Lisa Henderson includes mostly “women-only fiction, poetry, drawings, and photographs. It also features sexual advice columns, editorials on lesbian sexual culture and sexual politics, book, film and video reviews, display advertising for sexual and non-sexual services and supplies, letters to the editor, reports from lesbian events, occasional readership surveys, safer sex guidelines, and classified personal ads and announcements, among other attractions.”

Henderson argues that representations of lesbian sex in magazines like *On Our Backs* are “a potentially transgressive and transformative site. What is socially marginal becomes symbolically central through a politicized appropriation of sexual taboo, a threat (in the service of lesbian desire) to the sexual codes of both straight society and anti-porn feminist orthodoxy.”

For many, *On Our Backs* is a symbol of sexually transgressive lesbian politics and represents a progressive move toward sexual liberation.

In the following analysis, we ask whether or not the lesbian-produced pornography in *On Our Backs* constructs sexual desires, dynamics, and practices that challenge and/or transgress power dynamics structured along the lines of social inequalities. The analysis is based on a reading of the fictional stories published in sixteen issues in 1991 and 1992. We analyzed the stories in terms of their narrative story lines, constructed sexual dynamics, use of narrative voice, and descriptive language. In this analysis, we consider four key components of mass-marketed pornography involved in the subordination of women as outlined by Andrea Dworkin—hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence. While Dworkin mostly focuses on the sexualization of gender inequality, we use these components to define multiple forms of social inequality. We found that the stories in *On Our Backs* offer a variety of discourse strategies ranging from objectified language to poetry and metaphor. The sexual dynamics in the stories are constructed mostly along the lines of power difference and hierarchy (e.g., age, social status, occupation). Most of the stories concern concrete, one-time sexual encounters between women, although one story features sex between a woman and two dolphins, and another portrays sex between two women and a statue that comes to life. Like the pornography produced for men from which lesbian pornography borrows heavily, the lesbian stories emphasize several motifs. Fifty percent of the stories deal with anonymous sex, that is, sex between strangers or persons who meet shortly before the sexual encounter. Sixty-eight percent of the stories represent sexual relations in public places, such as at the opera, a bar, a hallway, an office, a cemetery, or the woods. Fifty percent of the stories construct sexual dynamics characterized by dominance and submission and involve varying levels of violence, bondage, and humiliation.
LESBIAN STYLE OBJECTIFICATION

In about half of the stories, the authors use a range of objectifying language to describe sexual desire, dynamics, and relations between the women. The story in our sample that used the harshest and most explicit form of sexual objectification was “Cum E–Z.” The story is about a lesbian who purchases the sexual services of a woman working in prostitution. Presented as a first-person narrative, the story begins as follows, “You see that thing over there. You see that thing over there? She’s $20.00. You got twenty dollars? Then you can fuck her.”15 As the protagonist searches for a woman who works in prostitution, the narrative voice explains, “Hunting for a female who meant nothing to her. A thing. Meat. A slut. A piece.”16 During the sexual transaction, the narrative voice again comments, “The idea that they didn’t like being with a woman made it even better in a perverted kind of way; gave her a sense of power, increased her dominance.”17 Finally, at the end of the encounter, the narrator remarks, “A scene of degradation. Pain of the soul. But of freedom also. It’s all about freedom and power and control.”18

In this piece, the author eroticizes what we interpret as the annihilation of the humanity of the woman who works in prostitution for the purpose of the lesbian customer’s sexual pleasure and power. The story strips the humanity of the woman in prostitution to her supposed essence—sex. She is referred to as an object, a thing, a piece of meat throughout the story. The dehumanized objectification of the woman as well as the sex is mirrored in the terse language of the story that is extremely simple and bare. The syntax is stripped to its core; throughout, most sentences consist only of a subject and verb, and often not even that. This story exists against a backdrop of women who are prostituted, who are subject to rape, assault, and murder on a daily basis. We question the dehumanization of women in prostitution for the purposes of sexual entertainment. We ask: Whose pleasure? At whose expense?

Stories are also present in On Our Backs that rely less on objectification for desire and pleasure. These stories celebrate women and sex in a language that is poetic and more complexly nuanced. For example, in a short piece entitled “Lila,” the narrator describes sexual encounters with another woman in ways that demonstrate human connection and intimacy. She states, “When I was the right temperature, when I could be wrapped in glory, when I could be trusted, and praising, and praised, she would start to sing. Her mouth would arrive between my legs, her tongue a palm leaf, burning, fanning, her teeth sticking my clit, two fingers inside me moving like a small question.”19 This is the only story in our sample that developed intimate relations completely without objectification and that did not use social distance between the characters to construct the sexual dynamics.
The lesbian sadomasochist community and their allies continue to be significant voices in setting the terms and questions of the feminist sexuality debates. Their identities and interests are central to the arguments in defense of the pornography industry and the rights of “sexual minorities.” As an individual sexual identity and practice, sexual liberals and radicals both defend sadomasochism. As in other parts of the debate, sexual practices are individual and private choices and thus worthy of protection from social analysis.

Lesbians who defend sexual sadomasochism argue that antipornography feminists avoid and/or condemn sadomasochism out of fear, rather than knowledge. In the introduction to Samois’s edited collection *Coming to Power* (1981), Katherine Davis writes, “What we fear we try to keep contained.” By repressing, condemning, and/or ostracizing lesbians who identify with sexual sadomasochism, she argues, antipornography feminists deny the complex truths about women’s sexual desires and pleasures. She writes:

We must reexamine our politics of sex and power. The challenge of talking personally and explicitly about the ways we are sexual, and about how our sexuality differs, is not so much destructive as it is corrective, and necessary. The logical place to begin is to talk about our sexuality as it is . . . . We will find many differences among and between us, but it is better to do this work than to continually hide from our fears and insecurities. We must put the rhetorical weaponry aside and willingly engage each other, without simply jumping ahead into a new sexual conformity.20

Davis describes the book *Coming to Power*, for instance, as a “statement, a confrontation, and a challenge. It calls for a re-evaluation of existing lesbian-feminist ethics, saying, ‘You must own your ‘illegitimate’ children.’”21 Lesbian advocates of sexual sadomasochism make analogies between the resistance and fear of sadomasochism and the homophobia of the late ’60s and early ’70s in the women’s movement. They define sexual sadomasochism as a sexual identity, like queer identity, that has been unfairly stigmatized. Just as queer identities are defined as radical alternatives to compulsory heterosexuality, they label sexual sadomasochism as a deviantly radical sexual identity and practice. According to sex radicals, sadomasochism challenges a sexual orthodoxy that only sanctions “vanilla” heterosexual sex based in intimate relational dynamics that are free of power and control.
Feminists critical of sexual sadomasochism disagree. Linden, for instance, argues that s/m is “firmly rooted in patriarchal sexual ideology, with its emphasis on the fragmentation of desire from the rest of our lives and the single-minded pursuit of gratification, sexual and otherwise. . . . Sadomasochism is as much an irreducible condition of society as it is an individual ‘sexual preference’ or lifestyle: indeed, sadomasochism reflects the power asymmetries embedded in most of our social relationships.” Pornography produced by the mainstream white male-dominant heterosexual industry is grounded in sadomasochistic dynamics built on social inequalities. Sexual sadomasochism, from this perspective, explicitly eroticizes bipolar oppositions that resemble social power differences. In terms of gender dynamics, pornography’s normal heterosexuality is sadomasochistic with men’s sexual aggression constructed in relation to women’s sexual submission. As Dworkin writes, “So-called normal sex occurs when the normal sexual aggressiveness of the male meets the normal masochism of the female not in an alley.”

As we noted earlier, many of the stories in On Our Backs reflect the sexual dynamics of sadomasochism. We determined this by assuming the definition of sadomasochism (s/m) offered by the lesbians who are its advocates and practitioners. Pat Califia defines sadomasochism as “an erotic ritual that involves acting out fantasies in which one partner is sexually dominant and the other partner is sexually submissive. This ritual is preceded by a negotiation process that enables participants to select their roles, state their limits, and specify some of the activities which will take place.” The basic dynamic is an “eroticized, consensual exchange of power—not violence.” The main components, according to Califia, are communication, roles, bondage, physical pleasure or pain, and humiliation. Given the context of “consensual” sexual relations, the dynamics of power, dominance, and humiliation are individual, private forms of sexual pleasure, and not abusive nor violent. In our analysis of the stories in On Our Backs, we found that one-half of the stories contain sadomasochistic sexual practices and dynamics as defined by Califia. Three of the sixteen are markedly sadomasochistic; the others use some bondage or dominant/submissive roles but are not constructed around fully developed s/m scenarios. In each of the stories, authors give the participants prescribed sexual roles of “top” and “bottom.” They construct the roles along the lines of dominance and submission, and the sexual dynamics associate pain with pleasure.

According to Califia, the sexual roles in sadomasochist practices fulfill different desires for each of the participants. She suggests that the “bottom’s pleasure comes from being dominated, from experiencing intense physical sensations and forbidden emotions, and from having her sacrifices witnessed by the top. The top’s reward is the affirmation of her power and the sexual service she receives from the bottom. She participates vicariously in the delight and distress of her submissive.” In the sadomasochistic stories, the perspective that the reader is
most often privy to is that of the bottom. According to the stories in *On Our Backs*, the character occupying the role of bottom openly desires this position and its accompanying scenario. She is free to stop the role-playing at any point during the sexual scene. The construction of the narratives from the bottom’s perspective allows readers/consumers to set aside concerns about abusiveness and inequality, in order to gain sexual pleasure from the stories.

The scenarios themselves are built from existing inequalities, hierarchies, and sexual “taboos.” For instance, one story, “Daddy’s Little Girl,” is of a sexual scenario of father-daughter incestuous sex. The characters in the story include an authoritarian, strict, incestuous “daddy” and a “little-girl” who wants to be humiliated, punished, and fucked. The “little girl” is played by an adult woman who travels 150 miles to act out this incest scenario with another woman. The woman visited will play “Daddy” to her “little girl.” In the narrative, the woman who plays the “little girl” consents to the scenario and proceeds to construct it—”I wrote line after line for her, 100 lines, 200 lines. I beat myself for her, for me, for our father, just another variation on our theme. But it was never enough. I never felt cleansed, or redeemed, or free. Finally she ordered me to come to her.”

The story is written from the perspective of the woman who plays the “little girl”—the story claims to be about her desire, her need. This narrative strategy, which is typical of heterosexual pornography, neutralizes the interpretation of particular sexual practices by locating the origin of the sexual practices in the desire and consent of the less powerful bottom, in this case, the adult who takes the role of the “little girl.” The consumer reader is told that the scenario is constructed for the benefit and liberation of the bottom; it is about her “salvation.” According to the story, the sexual encounter will help the bottom rid herself of guilt through sexual punishment. At one point, the narrator/bottom explains, “On the phone it was like a confession to a priest, kneeling in the dark booth recounting my sins. I requested my own punishment in my search for forgiveness.”

Similarly, in another story, “Arizona’s Most Wanted,” which draws upon the roles of a police officer (top) and criminal (bottom), the story is told from the perspective of the so-called criminal. She is handcuffed, thrown in back of a police car, and taken to the police station by her ex-lover where she is strip-searched and fucked. The bottom pleads: “‘Please, officer,’ I whimpered, ‘sexually assault me.’” Again, the story is about the sexual desire of the powerless and her need to
be sexually fulfilled through abusive power. Consideration of the sexual power and desire of the top—the police officer—is deflected onto the consent of the bottom.

The sexual arousal and erotic power produced from these stories come from profoundly unequal social realities—incestuous assault and police brutality. While the authors construct the stories as if they naturally serve the bottom’s sexual desire and pleasure, in real life, the people who are in the roles of the bottom are powerless (children, prisoners) and are often sexually and physically exploited, beaten, and sometimes murdered. In real life, the public often blames the ones victimized and minimizes our experiences. In this social context, when people are trying to work against these abuses of power, against incredible odds, the use of such inequalities for sexual pleasure seems to reinforce rather than challenge endemic social inequality, abuse, and violence. When confronted with these realities, however, pornographers and their defenders argue that the realities are completely separate from the erotic stories. They claim that the images and stories are separate from the social context and that they are consumed by individuals in the privacy of their own sexual fantasies and practices. And yet, without the existence of these social realities, such eroticism would most likely not exist. The producers of pornography eroticize the brutality that some people experience for the sexual entertainment of others. Sometimes the groups are not different. Some argue that sadomasochistic pornography and the sexual practices on which it is based may benefit individual sexual abuse survivors who, in the context of sexual fantasy, may gain symbolic control over what happened to them as children. Some believe that s/m pornography and consensual sexual practice offer women a safe place to work out personal histories of sexual abuse. It is not our place to deny individual women the sexual paths we decide to explore and take, nor to condemn sexual desires and fantasies. Instead, our argument concerns a cultural industry—lesbian pornography—that profits from the existence of sexual abuse by eroticizing it and reproducing it. The industry does not seem to be engaged in critical analysis of the ways that these stories may simply reproduce dynamics of sexual abuse and assault. We believe the stories merit a discussion of their social implications in terms of lesbian sexual cultures and communities in broader social and political contexts.

Sex radicals distinguish sadomasochism from violence on the grounds of individual consent. According to lesbian sexual sadomasochists, each participating partner consents to the predetermined sexual practices and the sexual scenarios. Each has the capacity to stop the sexual action at any moment and thus each has the power to control the direction of the scene. The s/m stories in *On Our Backs* often illustrate the negotiation of individual consent. One sign of a bottom’s consent to be dominated is described as fearful sexual excitement. For instance, in “The Strength of Trees,” the bottom’s fear and mixed feelings in relation to the sexual acts become part of the sexual turn-on—she longs for the strength to refuse
participation. She begins to cry when she receives the orders for the scene from her ex-lover, an internationally known dominant, but her fear and confusion, according to the narrator, simply increase her sexual excitement and inability to call off the scene. In many ways, this seems like the typical “no-really-means-yes” scenario which is a common staple in heterosexual men’s pornography. What is different is that the negotiation of consent is actually addressed in the story: “Lena knew that with a single word she could bring the proceedings to a close. . . . Despite her confused emotions, she sighed and said ‘Yes.’” 30

Similarly “The Shower” explicitly addresses how the acting out of dominant and submissive roles is negotiated between the sexual partners and the roles are unstable rather than fixed. In the middle of a sex scene in the story, the two women characters start to giggle. The narrative presents their efforts to keep their roles intact and clear as comical and fun. At the same time, the narrator makes clear that ultimately the role of the top is to figure out how to sustain an air of control and power. She does this through language and physical grip, “letting [the bottom] know I could hurt her if her submission was not to my liking.” 31 Only one of the stories, “The Mistress of Iron,” involves an exchange or alternation of power positions between the participants. 32

A central component of the sexual turn-on in sexual sadomasochism is the connection between pain and pleasure. According to Califia (1980), there is no objective definition of pain because it is a subjective sensation that is interpreted within a particular context. While anything can stimulate feelings of pleasure or pain and while the sensations of pleasure may be the same, the interpretation of the sensation as pain or pleasure is dependent on the context. Califia argues that sexual arousal alters a person’s ability to perceive pain as pain. As an individual approaches orgasm, she is less sensitive to pain, and for some people, discomfort, stress, or actual pain may contribute to sexual pleasure.

The stories with sadomasochistic themes connect the sensations of pain with sexual pleasure. In the story that builds upon father-daughter incest, the “daddy” hits the “little girl” hard with a riding crop and slaps her repeatedly. According to the story, the level of pain determines the extent of the bottom’s pleasure. Upon being slapped hard, the bottom says, “And I start to cry, not because it hurts, but because being slapped gets to me more than anything else. It’s so intimate; it’s my face. I’m scared and caught up in the fantasy and she’s still fucking me hard, wild, and I want to touch her . . . She leaps off me, flips me over and starts hitting me with her belt, hard. . . . I try to get away, but I can’t. She holds me down with one hand and flogs me with the belt. . . .” 33 In “The Strength of Trees,” the author constructs fear and pain as integral to the sexual pleasure of the bottom. The top repeatedly slaps the bottom’s breast, so hard that the breast is described as “speckled dark red” and this is what gives the bottom the most pleasure. 34
Bondage is integral to the practice of sexual sadomasochism. In the On Our Backs short stories, the use of bondage ranges from a woman being blindfolded, tied to a tree, and brutalized,\(^35\) to a woman using rosary beads to “whip” her girlfriend in a Catholic church in Italy as an experience of exorcism from the Church.\(^36\) The former seems to be constructed as a more serious practice of sexual sadomasochism, whereas the latter is a seemingly playful rebellion against the dictates of the Church and its repressive attitudes toward women’s sexuality.

Humiliation is another staple. According to Califia, humiliation involves “the deliberate lowering of the bottom’s status,” treating her as if she were “an object, an animal, a slave, or the top’s inferior.”\(^37\) The purpose of humiliation is sexual excitement, not permanent injury. As Califia explains, “Humiliation is the emotional or psychological counterpart of physical discomfort or pain. . . . The bottom who derives pleasure from being shamed or abused is triumphing over that degradation” (that is, over feelings in real life of worthlessness). In a few of the stories, humiliation certainly is a component of the sexual turn-on. In the incest story, the “daddy” makes the girl tell “his” friends who are watching them about how he anally fucks her and prods her with fingers, sticks, and dildos. Humiliation, in this story, is also about the top’s pleasure, the power and pleasure of being like a man. Again it seems relevant to critically look at the ways that the stories capitalize on the feelings of humiliation and worthlessness, common for sexual-abuse survivors, in order to create sexual pleasure for a market of consumers. The dynamics central to sexual abuse are also central to the sexual turn-on, and thus not fully separate from the realities of abuse and its effects. Again, some argue that the sexual playing out of humiliation can be a valuable facilitator for survivors to work through the damage of sexual abuse. This may be true, however, it seems more complicated on a social level in the context of an industry profiting from the existence of endemic abuse that often combines physical, psychological, and sexual strategies to establish control and power.

The line between the use and abuse of humiliation is not clear in the stories, nor is the demarcation of control necessarily stable. Humiliation is integral to battering and sexual abuse. What are the social implications of a lesbian-created pornography using abusive language and interaction for sexual entertainment? Do the images and stories contribute to the apathy of lesbian communities in relation to domestic abuse and battery within lesbian relationships?\(^38\) These questions are not meant to be rhetorical with obvious and simplistic answers. The questions are asked in a context of cultural confusions around sexual desire and power in intimate relationships. These confusions are readily apparent at many lesbian cultural and social events. Recently, we attended a set of lesbian performances. One of the performances addressed lesbian domestic violence, and yet most lesbians in the audience laughed at the unequal power dynamics and the abusive acts of one of
the characters. This laughter may indicate a variety of responses on the part of individual audience members, including discomfort; yet it seemed clear that there was little consensus on what constitutes abusiveness in lesbian sexual dynamics. Open discussion of these issues might help clarify some of these confusions without simply polarizing our positions.

The question remains whether the pleasure of sexual sadomasochism is ultimately linked to liberatory and radical politics. While the stories may feel personally liberating and they may provide sexual pleasure to individual writers and readers, the stories do not exist in isolation from the broader culture and society. The social question must be asked in addition to the individual one. Do the stories and their construction of sexual relations contribute to the cultural confusion in this society between sex and violence? This is a confusion that often leads judges and juries to acquit rapists, it allows many people to deny the severity of sexual or physical assault, and it makes it difficult for women to label and understand their own experiences of sexual abuse. For example, this confusion is evident in the court decisions of two publicized assault cases. In both, the juries seemed to have difficulty recognizing physical assault or rape as “nonconsensual.” In one case, the videotape of Rodney King being beaten by police officers was played over and over again to the jury; the defense sought to demonstrate his resistance to arrest and therefore his need to be controlled and beaten. The first jury acquitted the police officers. In the other case, a man had videotaped the rape of his wife in North Carolina. She reported the rape to the police and the case went to court. During the trial, the videotape was allowed to serve as evidence of his story of a consensual sadomasochistic relationship, to discredit her story of rape and battery. He was acquitted. The lines between sex, violence, consent, pleasure, and force in this society are blurred; the confusion is fueled by pornographic and media industries that connect sexual pleasure with force and violence. The question to be posed is how lesbian pornography contributes to and/or challenges these confusions. While the purpose of lesbian pornography is to produce sexual pleasure, like other culture industries, it must also be open to social critique and discussion.

**LESBIAN LANGUAGE OF DESIRE**

We analyzed the language used in the stories’ dialogues in order to explore the relationship dynamics that were being constructed and eroticized. Sexual dynamics were most often constructed along the lines of power—dominance and submission. While a broad range of conversational interaction is reflected in the stories, we found that the dialogic language used immediately before and during the sex acts in most stories became increasingly harsh and hostile: “Lick me til I come, you fuck”39; “Piss on me goddamn it Sabrina!”40; “I begin frantically whispering in
her ear, telling her what a sweet whore she was . . . Now suck my cock and make sure you suck it good, bitch.” 41; “Let me fuck you baby, in the fucking street, I’m fucking you.” 42; “Now shut up and drown in my wetness.” 43 After the sexual encounter the story is usually brought to a rapid conclusion. In the descriptions of sexual encounters, the stories often associate sex with force. For example—“I tormented her rigid sudsy nipples until I felt faint with arousal, caught somewhere between tenderness and fury. . . . As soon as we got inside I grabbed her, calling her a bitch. . . . I mauled her tits with my hands and mouth.” 44; “I held her in my arms and slammed it in and out just the way she’s asked for it.” 45; “I was painfully aware that some part of me wanted to root around inside her like a troglodyte, to plunder her delicacy with a hard barbaric thrust. . . . I began my excruciatingly slow assault.” 46 In the stories, lesbian desire is consistently represented as functioning within an unequal power dynamic connected to hierarchical social relations.

In analyzing the language in the stories, we found a broad range of terms were used to refer to women. While humorous terms (e.g., stringbean, wimp, sisters in iron, no nonsense girl, gentlewoman) and terms emanating from lesbian culture (e.g., bulldagger, amazon woman, goddess, fierce woman) appear, many terms which refer to women reflect the framework of dominance and submission promoted in the stories. There are a plethora of sexualizing and objectifying terms (e.g., hooker, high-class twat, bitch, whore, merchandise, piece, slut, cocksucker), as well as infantilizing terms (e.g., bad/good little girl, daddy’s girl) which figure in the narratives of sexualized power relations.

The vagina is referred to in the stories by a variety of names: gash, pussy, wet prison. By far the most common term is cunt. These terms are also staples of male-oriented pornography from which lesbian pornography borrows heavily. The clitoris is also often referred to in a way that creates an analogy, explicitly or implicitly, with the penis: “My clit was so stiff I was afraid everyone could see it poking through my tights.” 47; “she gave my clit an instant hard-on.” 48 Rather than creating newly formed sexual dynamics, the languages and imagery in lesbian pornography seem highly derivative.

**LESBIAN REBELLION ISN’T REVOLUTIONARY**

We found that the lesbian pornography of On Our Backs short stories may be rebellious but not revolutionary. Because lesbians (and women in general) have not had the opportunities to explore, discuss, or celebrate sexual identities, sexual desires, and sexual practices, lesbian pornography seems to be rebellious. It is openly sexual, it attempts to use the sexual language that has been used against women and lesbians, and in some respects, it seems to try to challenge the ideology of women solely as victims, sexually passive, and repressed. It also provides a
forum for information and resources about sexual identities, desires, and practices. On the other hand, it is derivative and not transformative. It does not seem to push the boundaries of mainstream pornographic constructions of sexual desire and practice. The language of sexual desire, the central dynamics of dominance and submission, and the one-way forms of objectification are not explored, challenged, or revisioned. Terms like *slut*, *whore*, and *bitch* remain negative and often disempowering terms in the stories—they are not redefined or reclaimed to challenge sexism. The sexual practices grounded in dominance and submission are simply used by women in relationship with other women. While the stories may challenge the sexual emptiness of much lesbian-feminist culture, they lack imagination in terms of a broader vision of sexual and social transformation. Also, while consumers of lesbian pornography may describe it as a form of resistance to men’s control over women’s sexuality, the fact that it is rebellious does not make it revolutionary.49

As lesbian sex industries grow, it seems an opportune time to be reflective of what they are in fact accomplishing. If lesbian-created culture industries uncritically accept the incorporation of social inequalities, exploitation, and sexual abuse into its fantasy commodities, what impact will this have on lesbian perspectives on social justice and transformation? It seems imperative to explore the social ramifications of using such exploitative real world relations as grounds for creating sexual entertainment and profit. At the very least, the assumption that this is a liberating cultural and sexual commodity that will guide us toward freedom might be further explored, rather than simply defended or condemned outright. From a feminist social justice perspective, it behooves us to ask always—Whose liberation? At whose expense? Whose freedom? On the backs of whose lives?

Perhaps Kitzinger and Kitzinger are correct to suggest that producing lesbian erotic material that is substantially different in form and substance is difficult in the current context. They suggest that “changing the political and social conditions within which images of lesbian sex are produced is an essential prerequisite to the creation of more liberatory images. Then, and perhaps only then, can we create and view representations of lesbian passion and desire, which are affirmative, challenging, and truly transgressive.”50