

# Eroticizing Women's Subordination

Sheila Jeffreys

I want to talk about the construction of women's sexuality around our subordination, and what, if anything, we can do about it as lesbians and as heterosexual women.

This has become a crucial issue because of the backlash, developed by women describing themselves as feminists, against those of us who fight pornography. In the early days, when we were first fighting pornography and male sexual violence, it appeared to be a straightforward struggle.

It was never really a straightforward struggle, since those of us involved in the British feminist movement against pornography often sat around in groups and admitted, though not at first since it was not easy, that even the most antiwoman material with which we were dealing could cause us to be turned on. Individual feminists who had that sort of reaction to the pornography we were analyzing and trying to do something about, would feel individually guilty and individually isolated. We especially would feel so when other women in the group would say they couldn't imagine how anybody could possibly be turned on to this material.

After this situation had existed for a few years and we had not made very much progress in understanding sexual reactions to pornography, a backlash developed against us. This backlash came from women who described themselves as feminists and who said they wanted to create a new feminist erotica. Not surprisingly, the new feminist erotica looked a lot like the old antifeminist pornography: it eroticized dominance and submission.

Some of those women involved in fighting the feminist activists against pornography, some of those involved in creating the, supposedly new, dominance-and-submission erotica, are feminists who at one

time were involved in fighting pornography and male violence themselves.

What I think happened is that as feminists started putting out slide shows analyzing pornography, and as women started having reactions to those slides—at times becoming turned on by those slides themselves—there were two choices that women could make. They could say: "I am turned on by these slides. Isn't it absolutely horrifying how my subordination as a woman has been eroticised and gotten into what is the most intimate and personal part of me—the middle of my heart and my body—and appears to be part of what is most personal and most mine?"

They could say that, and become absolutely furious about the extent to which women's oppression can actually enter into our hearts and minds. That is the choice I have made and other feminists have made. And therefore it motivates us even more to fight pornography and male violence.

Alternatively, women who are turned on by such slides could think: "I am aroused by this material. Therefore, I am angry with the feminists who are showing it to me. I am angry because they are making me feel guilty and ashamed. Therefore, I will fight them." I think this is why some feminists are fighting the antipornography activists, are fighting us.

What I'm suggesting is that we all have the same problem: the way in which our subordination has been eroticized. But there are two ways of dealing with that injury: one is the feminist direction, and the other is fighting feminists on this issue.

So it seems to me that the most important thing we have to do in order to move on is to talk together as women, consciousness-raise, about the construction of our sexuality. We've got to talk about those things that have been so hard to talk about, such as the fantasies we have had inside our heads, how we get turned on, what all of this is about. Then we can start discussing the difference between negative sexual feelings and positive sexual feelings. We can work out where we're going to draw the line for ourselves. I think there is a line to be drawn, and as yet there is a lot of confusion as to where it should go.

When we do that, when we are able to talk together about these things, we will be able to come to grips with the extent to which we have internalized our oppression, and how it has affected us. Then and only then will we be able to get together again, reconnect, unify, direct our anger out there at pornography and male sexual violence.

You probably know that some of the libertarians who have been eroticizing dominance and submission have been promoting practices among lesbians such as butch and femme role playing in relationships,

as well as sadomasochism. Butch and femme is beginning to take over any kind of possible analysis of lesbian sexuality right now, and I find this very alarming. (For a discussion of the implications of the revamping of role-playing for lesbians, see Sheila Jeffreys, 1987.) An example of the eulogizing of role playing is an article called "What We're Rolling Around in Bed With" by Cherrie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh (Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, 1984). In that article, Amber Hollibaugh identifies as a femme and says that you must not injure the sexual identity of a butch because it is fragile. Where have we heard this before? Therefore, she says, she would just go and sit on the lap of a butch rather than make an approach to a butch in any way more obvious.

Her co-author, Cherrie Moraga, identified as a butch in this article, talks about how—because she is butch—she doesn't just go and sit on somebody's lap; she goes for the throat. Now the part played by the femme here is terribly similar to the role of the heterosexual femme in Marabel Morgan's antifeminist classic, *The Total Woman* (Marabel Morgan, 1975).

A problem with raising these issues is that it can look as if it is only or mostly lesbians who are eroticizing dominance and submission. That, of course, is far from the truth. However, it is necessary for lesbians to confront role playing in order to work toward an egalitarian sexuality. When I came out as a lesbian, for the first time I wasn't playing games, and I wasn't imagining that the person I was with was somebody completely different with incredible powers that she actually didn't have. For the first time, I was able to have an egalitarian sexual experience.

I do believe that it is possible for women to transform our sexuality and to move toward egalitarian ways of relating sexually. But I think this transformation may be more difficult for heterosexual women than for lesbians.

Role playing is endemic to heterosexuality, of course, but women with raised consciousnesses often see themselves as exempt. If you look at any pro-feminist, nonsexist couple, you will find that the disparity between the ways in which they sit, move, and dress is extreme. The eroticizing of inequality is not necessary to lesbianism since the inequality of sex class is not the basis of the sexual relationship. It is difficult to imagine how heterosexual desire—considering the role playing in just about every relationship—could possibly be egalitarian.

So, I think that as lesbians and as heterosexual women we all have a problem to confront and try to solve. I think we've got to do something about the eroticizing of our own subordination. It's undermining to us personally, and it's undermining to our relationships. It's also undermining to us politically because it makes it difficult to fight male

supremacy. Only by attacking the construction of our sexuality can we move forward and actually make an impact upon the hetero-patriarchal society in which we live. So perhaps we can begin a dialogue, as lesbians and heterosexual women, about how we go further toward an egalitarian sexuality.

## REFERENCES

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