

SEX ISSUE

HERESIES #12



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Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics is published Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall by Heresies Collective, Inc., 225 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012.

Subscription rates: \$15 for four issues; \$24 for institutions. Outside the U.S. and Canada add \$2 postage. Single copies: \$5 each. Address all correspondence to *Heresies*, PO Box 766, Canal Street Station, New York, NY 10013.

Heresies, ISSN 0146-3411. Vol. 3, No. 4, Issue 12.

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Printed by Faculty Press, Brooklyn, NY

Cover fragments taken from "Blue Confessions: A Fantasy" by Martha Balsam.

FEMINISM AND S/M

I hope you only do those things in leather bars. If I ever saw women doing S/M in a lesbian bar, it would make me so angry I'd want to beat them up.

— Anonymous gratuitous comment

Three years ago, I decided to stop ignoring my sexual fantasies. Since the age of two, I had been constructing a private world of dominance, submission, punishment, and pain. Abstinence, consciousness-raising, and therapy had not blighted the charm of these frightful reveries. I could not tolerate any more guilt, anxiety, or frustration, so I cautiously began to experiment with real sadomasochism. I did not lose my soul in the process. But in those three years, I lost a lover, several friends, a publisher, my apartment, and my good name because of the hostility and fear evoked by my openness about my true sexuality.

Writing this article is painful because it brings back the outrage and hurt I felt at being ostracized from the lesbian feminist community. I've been a feminist since I was 13 and a lesbian since I was 17. I didn't lose just a ghetto or a subculture—lesbian feminism was the matrix I used to become an adult. Fortunately for my sanity and happiness, I managed to construct a new social network. My friends and lovers are bisexual women (some of whom do S/M professionally), gay and bisexual men, and other outlaw lesbians. If I were isolated, I would not be strong enough to speak out about something that makes me this vulnerable.

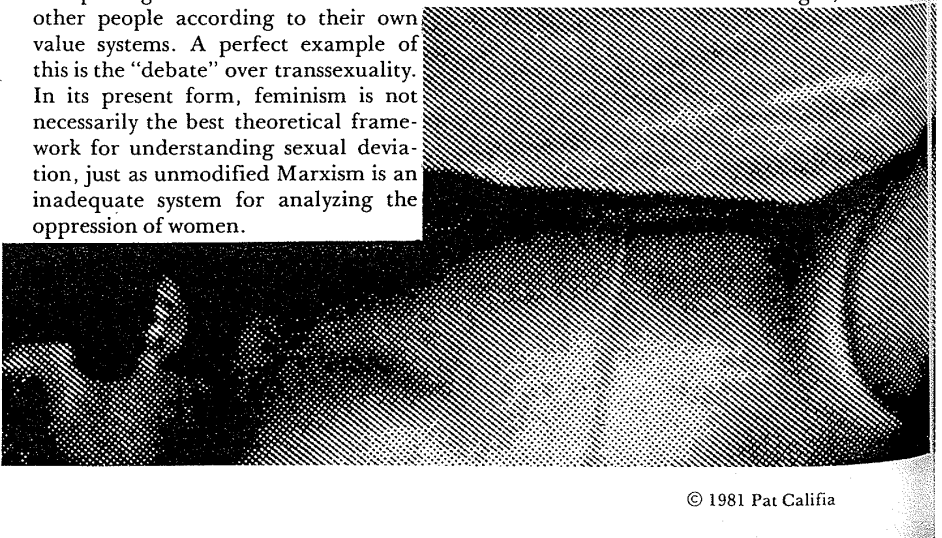
I describe my feelings about this issue because sadomasochism is usually dealt with in an abstract, self-righteous way by feminist theorists who believe it is the epitome of misogyny, sexism, and violence. In this article I shall examine sadomasochism in a theoretical way, and attempt a rapprochement between feminism and S/M. But I am motivated by my concern for the people who are frightened or ashamed of their erotic response to sadomasochistic fantasies. I don't want to hear any more tragic stories from women who have repressed their own sexuality because they think that's the only politically

acceptable way to deal with a yearning for helplessness or sexual control. I don't believe that any more than I believe homosexuals should be celibate so they can continue to be good Catholics. The women's movement has become a moralistic force, and it can contribute to the self-loathing and misery experienced by sexual minorities. Because sexual dissenters are already being trampled on by monolithic, prudish institutions, I think it is time the women's movement started taking more radical positions on sexual issues.

It is difficult to discuss sadomasochism in feminist terms because some of the slang S/M people use to talk about our sexuality has been appropriated by feminist propagandists. Terms like "roles," "masochism," "bondage," "dominance," and "submission" have become buzzwords. Their meanings in a feminist context differ sharply from their significance to S/M people. The discussion is rendered even more difficult because feminist theorists do not do their homework on human sexuality before pronouncing judgment on a sexual variation. Like Victorian missionaries in Polynesia, they insist on interpreting the sexual behavior of other people according to their own value systems. A perfect example of this is the "debate" over transsexuality. In its present form, feminism is not necessarily the best theoretical framework for understanding sexual deviation, just as unmodified Marxism is an inadequate system for analyzing the oppression of women.

Since the label "feminist" has become debased coinage, let me explain why I call myself a feminist. I believe that the society I live in is a patriarchy, with power concentrated in the hands of men, and that this patriarchy actively prevents women from becoming complete and independent human beings. Women are oppressed by being denied access to economic resources, political power, and control over their own reproduction. This oppression is managed by several institutions, chiefly the family, religion, and the state. An essential part of the oppression of women is control over sexual ideology, mythology, and behavior. This social control affects the sexual nonconformist as well as the conformist. Because our training in conventional sexuality begins the minute we are born and because the penalties for rebellion are so high, no individual or group is completely free from erotic tyranny.

I am not a separatist. I believe that men can be committed to the destruction of the patriarchy. After all, the rewards of male dominance are given only to men who perpetuate and cooperate with the system. I am not "woman-identified"—i.e., I do not believe that women have more insight,



SADOMASOCHISM

PAT CALIFIA

intuition, virtue, identification with the earth, or love in their genes than men. Consequently, I cannot support everything women do, and I believe the women's movement could learn a lot from politicized or deviant men. On the other hand, I do not find it easy to work with men, partly because male feminist theory is pitifully underdeveloped. I do not think separatism is worthless or bankrupt. It can be useful as an organizing strategy and teaches women valuable survival skills. The taste of autonomy that separatism provides is intoxicating, and can be a powerful incentive to struggle for real freedom.

I think it is imperative that feminists dismantle the institutions that foster the exploitation and abuse of women. The family, conventional sexuality, and gender are at the top of my hit list. These institutions control the emotional, intimate lives of every one of us, and they have done incalculable damage to women. I cannot imagine how such drastic change can be accomplished without armed struggle, the appropriation and reallocation of wealth, and a change in the ownership of the means of production. When women are liberated, women will

probably cease to exist, since our whole structure of sex and gender must undergo a complete transformation.

The term "somasochism" has also been debased, primarily by the mass media, clinical psychology, and the anti-pornography movement. After all, homophobia is not the only form of sexual prejudice. Every minority sexual behavior has been mythologized and distorted. There is a paucity of accurate, explicit, nonjudgmental information about sex in modern America. This is one way sexual behavior is controlled. If people don't know a particular technique or lifestyle exists, they aren't likely to try it. If the only images they have of a certain sexual act are ugly, disgusting, or threatening, they will either not engage in that act or be furtive about enjoying it.

Since there is so much confusion about what S/M is, I want to describe my own sexual specialties and the sado-masochistic subculture. I am basically a sadist. About 10% of the time, I take the other role (bottom, slave, masochist). This makes me atypical, since the majority of women and men involved in S/M prefer to play bottom. I enjoy leathersex, bondage, various forms of erotic torture, flagellation (whipping), verbal humiliation, fist-fucking, and watersports (playing with enemas and piss). I do not enjoy oral sex unless I am receiving it as a form of sexual service, which means my partner must be on her knees, on her back, or at least in a collar. I have non-S/M sex rarely, mostly for old times' sake, with vanilla friends* I want to stay

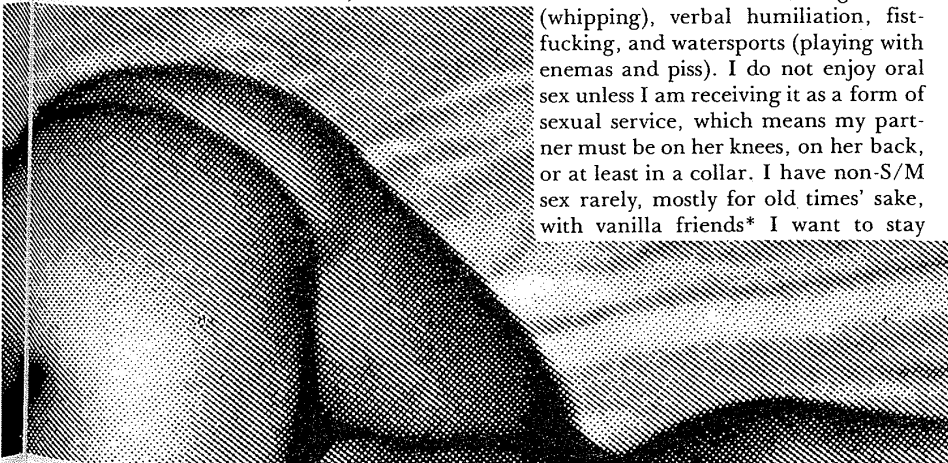
close to. My primary relationship is with a woman who enjoys being my slave. We enjoy tricking with other people and telling each other the best parts afterward.

Because somasochism is usually portrayed as a violent, dangerous activity, most people do not think there is a great deal of difference between a rapist and a bondage enthusiast. Sado-masochism is not a form of sexual assault. It is a consensual activity that involves polarized roles and intense sensations. An S/M scene is always preceded by a negotiation in which the top and bottom decide whether or not they will play, what activities are likely to occur, what activities will not occur, and about how long the scene will last. The bottom is usually given a "safe word" or "code action" she can use to stop the scene. This safe word allows the bottom to enjoy a fantasy that the scene is not consensual, and to protest verbally or resist physically without halting stimulation.

The key word to understanding S/M is *fantasy*. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual. The participants are enhancing their sexual pleasure, not damaging or imprisoning one another. A sado-masochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the sum total of her being.

S/M relationships are usually egalitarian. Very few bottoms want a full-time mistress. In fact, the stubbornness and aggressiveness of the masochist is a byword in the S/M community. Tops often make nervous jokes about being slaves to the whims of their bottoms. After all, the top's pleasure is dependent on the bottom's willingness to play. This gives most sadists a mild-to-severe case of performance anxiety.

The S/M subculture is a theater in which sexual dramas can be acted out



and appreciated. It also serves as a vehicle for passing on new fantasies, new equipment, warnings about police harassment, introductions to potential sex partners and friends, and safety information. Safety is a major concern of sadomasochists. A major part of the sadist's turn-on consists of deliberately altering the emotional or physical state of the bottom. Even a minor accident like a rope burn can upset the top enough to mar the scene. And, of course, a bottom can't relax and enjoy the sex if she doesn't completely trust her top. The S/M community makes some attempt to regulate itself by warning newcomers away from individuals who are inconsiderate, insensitive, prone to playing when they are intoxicated, or unsafe for other reasons. The suppression of S/M isolates novice sadists and masochists from this body of information, which can make playing more rewarding and minimize danger.

For some people, the fact that S/M is consensual makes it acceptable. They may not understand why people enjoy it, but they begin to see that S/M people are not inhumane monsters. For other people, including many feminists, the fact that it is consensual makes it even more appalling. A woman who deliberately seeks out a sexual situation in which she can be helpless is a traitor in their eyes. Hasn't the women's movement been trying to persuade people for years that women are not naturally masochistic?

Originally, this slogan meant that women do not create their own second-class status, do not enjoy it, and are the victims of socially constructed discrimination, not biology. A sexual masochist probably doesn't want to be raped, battered, discriminated against on her job, or kept down by the system. Her desire to act out a specific sexual fantasy is very different from the pseudopsychiatric dictum that a woman's world is bound by housework, intercourse, and childbirth.

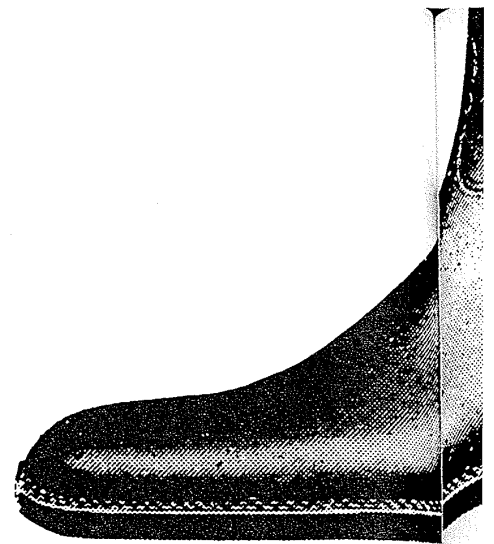
Some feminists object to the description of S/M as consensual. They believe that our society has conditioned all of us to accept inequities in power and hierarchical relationships. Therefore, S/M is simply a manifestation of the same system that dresses girls in pink and boys in blue, allows surplus value to accumulate in the coffers of capitalists and gives workers a minimum wage, and sends cops out to keep the disfranchised down.

It is true, as I stated before, that

society shapes sexuality. We can make any decision about our sexual behavior we like, but our imagination and ability to carry out those decisions are limited by the surrounding culture. But I do not believe that sadomasochism is the result of institutionalized injustice to a greater extent than heterosexual marriage, lesbian bars, or gay male bathhouses. The system is unjust because it assigns privileges based on race, gender, and social class. During an S/M encounter, the participants select a particular role because it best expresses their sexual needs, how they feel about a particular partner, or which outfit is clean and ready to wear. The most significant reward for being a top or a bottom is sexual pleasure. If you don't like being a top or a bottom, you switch your keys. Try doing that with your biological sex or your race or your socioeconomic status. The S/M subculture is affected by sexism, racism, and other fallout from the system, but the dynamic between a top and a bottom is quite different from the dynamic between men and women, whites and Blacks, or upper- and working-class people. The roles are acquired and used in very different ways.

Some feminists still find S/M roles disturbing, because they believe they are derived from genuinely oppressive situations. They accuse sadomasochism of being fascistic because of the symbolism employed to create an S/M ambiance. And some S/M people do enjoy fantasies that are more elaborate than a simple structure of top versus bottom. An S/M scene can be played out using the personae of guard and prisoner, cop and suspect, Nazi and Jew, white and Black, straight man and queer, parent and child, priest and penitent, teacher and student, whore and client, etc.

However, no symbol has a single meaning. Its meaning is derived from the context in which it is used. Not everyone who wears a swastika is a Nazi, not everyone who has a pair of handcuffs on his belt is a cop, and not everyone who wears a nun's habit is a Catholic. S/M is more a parody of the



hidden sexual nature of fascism than it is a worship of or acquiescence to it. How many real Nazis, cops, priests, or teachers would be involved in a kinky sexual scene? It is also a mistake to assume that the historical oppressor is always the top in an S/M encounter. The child may be chastising the parent, the prisoner may have turned the tables on the cop, and the queer may be forcing the straight man to confront his sexual response to other men. The dialogue in some S/M scenes may sound sexist or homophobic from the outside, but its real meaning is probably neither. A top can call his bottom a cocksucker to give him an instruction (i.e., indicate that the top wants oral stimulation), encourage him to lose his inhibitions and perform an act he may be afraid of, or simply acknowledge shame and guilt and use it to enhance the sex act rather than prevent it.

S/M eroticism focuses on whatever feelings or actions are forbidden, and searches for a way to obtain pleasure from the forbidden. It is the quintessence of nonreproductive sex. Those feminists who accuse sadomasochists of mocking the oppressed by playing with dominance and submission forget that *we* are oppressed. We suffer police harassment, violence in the street, discrimination in housing and in employment. We are not treated the way our system treats its collaborators and supporters.

The issue of pain is probably as difficult for feminists to understand as polarized roles. We tend to associate pain with illness or self-destruction. First of all, S/M does not necessarily involve pain. The exchange of power is more essential to S/M than intense sensation, punishment, or discipline. Second, pain is a subjective experience. Depending on the context, a certain



sensation may frighten you, make you angry, urge you on, or get you hot. People choose to endure pain or discomfort if the goal they are striving for makes it worthwhile. Long-distance runners are not generally thought of as sex perverts, nor is St. Theresa. The fact that masochism is disapproved of when stressful athletic activity and religious martyrdom are not is an interesting example of the way sex is made a special case in our society. We seem to be incapable of using the same reason and compassion we apply to non-sexual issues to formulate our positions on sexual issues.

S/M violates a taboo that preserves the mysticism of romantic sex. Any pain involved is deliberate. Aroused human beings do not see, smell, hear, taste, or perceive pain as acutely as the nonaroused individual. Lots of people find bruises or scratches the morning after an exhilarating session of love-making and can't remember exactly how or when they got them. The sensations involved in S/M are not that different. But we're supposed to fall into bed and do it with our eyes closed. Good, enthusiastic sex is supposed to happen automatically between people who love each other. If the sex is less than stunning, we tend to blame the quality of our partner's feelings for us. Planning a sexual encounter and using toys or equipment to produce specific feelings seems antithetical to romance.

What looks painful to an observer is probably being perceived as pleasure, heat, pressure, or a mixture of all these by the masochist. A good top builds sensation slowly, alternates pain with pleasure, rewards endurance with more pleasure, and teaches the bottom to transcend her own limits. With enough preparation, care, and encouragement, people are capable of

doing wonderful things. There is a special pride which results from doing something unique and extraordinary for your lover. The sadomasochist has a passion for making use of the entire body, every nerve fiber, and every wayward thought.

Recently, I have heard feminists use the term "fetishistic" as an epithet and a synonym for "objectifying." Sadomasochists are often accused of substituting things for people, of loving the leather or rubber or spike heels more than the person who is wearing them. Objectification originally referred to the use of images of stereotypically feminine women to sell products like automobiles and cigarettes. It also referred to the sexual harassment of women and the notion that we should be available to provide men with sexual gratification without receiving pleasure in return and without the right to refuse to engage in sex. A concept which was originally used to attack the marketing campaigns of international corporations and the sexual repression of women is now being used to attack a sexual minority.

Fetish costumes are worn privately or at S/M gatherings. They are as unacceptable to employers and advertising executives as a woman wearing overalls and smoking a cigar. Rather than being part of the sexual repression of women, fetish costumes can provide the women who wear them with sexual pleasure and power. Even when a fetish costume exaggerates the masculine or feminine attributes of the wearer, it cannot properly be called sexist. Our society strives to make masculinity in men and femininity in women appear natural and biologically determined. Fetish costumes violate this rule by being too theatrical and deliberate. Since fetish costumes may also be used to transform the gender of the wearer, they are a further violation of sexist standards for sex-specific dress and conduct.

The world is not divided into people who have sexual fetishes and people who don't. There is a continuum of response to certain objects, substances, and parts of the body. Very few people

are able to enjoy sex with anyone, regardless of their appearance. Much fetishism probably passes as "normal" sexuality because the required cues are so common and easy to obtain that no one notices how necessary they are.

Human sexuality is a complicated phenomenon. A cursory examination will not yield the entire significance of a sexual act. Fetishes have several qualities which make them erotically stimulating and unacceptable to the majority culture. Wearing leather, rubber, or a silk kimono distributes feeling over the entire skin. The isolated object may become a source of arousal. This challenges the identification of sex with the genitals. Fetishes draw all the senses into the sexual experience, especially the sense of smell and touch. Since they are often anachronistic or draw attention to erogenous zones, fetish costumes cannot be worn on the street. Fetishes are reserved for sexual use only, yet they are drawn from realms not traditionally associated with sexuality. Fetishism is the product of imagination and technology.

Sadomasochism is also accused of being a hostile or angry kind of sex, as opposed to the gentle and loving kind of sex that feminists should strive for. The women's movement has become increasingly pro-romantic love in the last decade. Lesbians are especially prone to this sentimental trend. Rather than being critical of the idea that one can find enough fulfillment in a relationship to justify one's existence, feminists are seeking membership in a perfect, egalitarian couple. I question the value of this.

There is no concrete evidence that the childhoods of sadomasochists contained any more corporal punishment, puritanism, or abuse than the childhoods of other people. There is also no evidence that we secretly fear and hate our partners. S/M relationships vary from no relationship at all (the S/M is experienced during fantasy or masturbation) to casual sex with many partners to monogamous couples, and include all shades in between. There are many different ways to express affection or sexual interest. Vanilla people send flowers, poetry, or candy, or they exchange rings. S/M people do all that, and may also lick boots, wear a locked collar, or build their loved one a rack in the basement. There is little objective difference between a feminist who is offended by the fact that my lover kneels to me in public and sub-

urbanites calling the cops because the gay boys next door are sunbathing in the nude. My sexual semiotics differ from the mainstream. So what? I didn't join the feminist movement to live inside a Hallmark greeting card.

Is there a single controversial sexual issue that the women's movement has not reacted to with a conservative, feminine horror of the outrageous and the rebellious? A movement that started out saying biology is *not* destiny is trashing transsexuals and celebrating women's "natural" connection to the earth and living things. A movement that spawned children's liberation is trashing boy-lovers and supporting the passage of draconian sex laws that assign heavier sentences for having sex with a minor than you'd get for armed robbery. A movement that developed an analysis of housework as unpaid labor and acknowledged that women usually trade sex for what they want because that's all they've got is joining the vice squad to get prostitutes off the street. A movement whose early literature was often called obscene and banned from circulation is campaigning to get rid of pornography. The only sex perverts this movement stands behind are lesbian mothers, and I suspect that's because of the current propaganda about women being the nurturing, healing force that will save the world from destructive male energy.

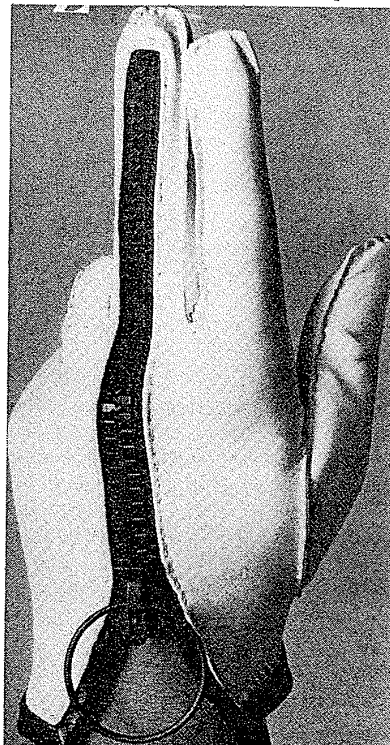
Lesbianism is being desexualized as fast as movement dykes can apply the whitewash. We are no longer demanding that feminist organizations acknowledge their lesbian membership. We are pretending that the words "feminist" and "woman" are synonyms for "lesbian."

The anti-pornography movement is the best of the worst of the women's movement, and it must take responsibility for much of the bigotry circulating in the feminist community. This movement has consistently refused to take strong public positions supporting sex education, consenting-adult legislation, the right to privacy, the decriminalization of prostitution, children's and adolescents' rights to sexual information and freedom, and the First Amendment. It has encouraged violence against sexual minorities, especially sadomasochists, by slandering sexual deviation as violence against women. Their view of S/M is derived from one genre of commercial pornography (male-dominant and female-submissive) and makes Krafft-Ebing look like a liberal.

Commercial pornography distorts all forms of sexual behavior. There are several reasons for this. One is that it is designed to make money, not to educate people or be aesthetically pleasing. The other is that it is quasi-legal, and thus must be produced as quickly and surreptitiously as possible. Another reason is that erotic material is intended to gratify fantasy, not serve as a model for actual behavior.

S/M pornography can be divided into several types, each designed for a different segment of the S/M subculture. Most of it represents women dominating and disciplining men, since the largest market for S/M porn is heterosexual submissive males. Very little S/M porn shows any actual physical damage or even implies that damage is occurring. Most of it depicts bondage, or tops dressed in fetish costumes and assuming threatening poses.

Very little S/M porn is well produced or informative. But eliminating it will have the effect of further impoverishing S/M culture and isolating sadomasochists from one another, since many of us make contact via personal ads carried in pornographic magazines. The excuse for banning "violent" porn is that this will end violence against women. The causal connection is dubious. It is indisputably true that very few people who consume pornography ever assault or rape an-



other person. When a rape or assault is committed, it usually occurs after some forethought and planning. But legally, a free society must distinguish between the fantasy or thought of committing a crime and the actual crime. It is not a felony to fantasize committing an illegal act, and it should not be, unless we want our morals regulated by the Brain Police. Banning S/M porn is the equivalent of making fantasy a criminal act. Violence against women will not be reduced by increasing sexual repression. People desperately need better information about sex; more humanistic and attractive erotica; more readily available birth control, abortion, and sex therapy; and more models for nontraditional, nonexploitative relationships.

I am often asked if sadomasochism will survive the revolution. I think all the labels and categories we currently use to describe ourselves will change dramatically in the next 100 years, even if the revolution does not occur. My fantasy is that kinkiness and sexual variation will multiply, not disappear, if terrible penalties are no longer meted out for being sexually adventurous.

There is an assumption behind the question that bothers me. The assumption that sadomasochists are part of the system rather than part of the rebellion has already been dealt with in this article. But there is another assumption — that we must enjoy being oppressed and mistreated. We like to wear uniforms? Then we must get off on having cops bust up our bars. We like to play with whips and nipple clamps and hot wax? Then it must turn us on when gangs of kids hunt us down, harass and beat us. We're not really human. We're just a bunch of leather jackets and spike heels, a bunch of post office boxes at the bottom of sex ads.

We make you uncomfortable, partly because we're different, partly because we're sexual, and partly because we're not so different. I'd like to know when you're going to quit blaming us, the victims of sexual repression, for the oppression of women. I'd like to know when you're going to quit objectifying us.

*Vanilla is to S/M what straight is to gay. I don't use the term as a pejorative, but because I believe sexual preferences are more like flavor preferences than like moral/political alliances.

Pat Califia has been involved in the lesbian-feminist movement for 10 years. She has led workshops for lesbians on sex education and written *Sapphistry*, a lesbian sex manual.