

Discerning New Feminisms from Sadomasochistic Pornography in *On Our Backs*

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Abstract

On Our Backs, a lesbian-feminist pornography magazine first published in 1984, features explicit lesbian sadomasochistic sex despite initial publication in a feminist politic critical of pornography and sadomasochism. The creators of *On Our Backs* expressed frustration with anti-porn discourse in the feminist movement and desired a feminism that was inclusive of

diverse lesbian sexualities. Through analysis of the erotica published in *On Our Backs* from 1984–1988, I demonstrate that the creators engaged with sadomasochistic fantasy and bodily sensations to develop feminisms that addressed their sexual needs while exploring what felt absent from second-wave feminism, anticipating the rise of feminism’s third-wave.

In the summer of 1984, a small group of women released the magazine *On Our Backs* (*OOB*) at a San Francisco Gay Day event. Their publication was the first of its kind: a lesbian-feminist pornography magazine published by and for lesbians. Residing in a lesbian-feminist politic that was critical of pornography, especially sadomasochistic pornography, *On Our Backs* published explicit lesbian sex acts through images and text that prioritized representations of taboo topics like bondage, fisting, genital piercing, and rape-fantasies when the lesbian-feminist movement deemed these acts as representative of oppressive male desire. Despite identifying with lesbian-feminism, a feminist ideology popularized within the second-wave feminist movement, the creators of the magazine were critical of repressive rhetoric in the movement and wished for a new feminism that explored the diversity of women's desires and experiences with scrutiny. The creators of *On Our Backs* explored the diversity of their desires and utilized fantasy to develop feminist thought that not only addressed their sexual needs as lesbian women, but also explored aspects of feminism that felt absent from their own experiences within the movement, ultimately anticipating the rise of feminism's third-wave.¹

When picking up a copy of *On Our Backs* from the rare willing bookseller or magazine stand in the 1980s, lesbian readers would have likely seen images and text that not only depicted, but celebrated lesbians participating in sadomasochism and fetish play. The editors and creators of *OOB*—Debi Sundahl, Nan Kinney, Susan (Susie) Bright, and Honey Lee Cottrell—created a pornography magazine that illustrated their values as lesbians and feminists while aiming to trigger arousal and explore the range and limits of lesbian sexuality, even if this sexuality fell outside of prescribed lesbian sexual expression. The pornography in *OOB* described real life encounters through kinky

¹ “Second-wave” and “third-wave” feminism are broad concepts that highlight shifting thought within feminist ideology in the United States. Second-wave feminism is associated with radical feminism, lesbian-feminism, and academic theories written in the 1960s-1980s that heavily criticize the patriarchy. Third-wave feminism is associated with U.S. feminist activism that arose in the early-to-mid-1990s. Third-wave feminist thought emphasized intersectionality, diversity, and sexual liberation. The ideologies of third-wave feminism are typically discussed through less academically rigorous disciplines, including punk music, zines, poetry, personal essays, and other art forms.

anecdotes-turned-erotica and explicit photographs. It also explored sexual fantasy through fiction-erotica and pornographic illustrations. These fantasies include sexual extremes: fantasies of women breaking-and-entering women's homes and raping them, penetration with foreign objects such as knife blades, and even stories about consensual immolation. The magazine's mixed genre composition invites a myriad of analytical approaches. My analysis deviates from the existing scholarship on *OOB*, primarily written by scholars Laura Guy and Elizabeth Groeneveld, who use archival research alongside textual and visual analysis to argue that the magazine aided in reshaping lesbian identities (Groeneveld 153; Guy 321). Although I do not disagree with the claims asserted by Groeneveld and Guy, my analysis explores affect theory and changing feminist epistemology. Through speculative reader response analysis, I explore how pornographic stories in *OOB* subvert expectations of lesbian sexuality through readers' affective reactions—corporal responses of arousal, disgust, excitement, or shame (as examples)—allowing paradigms within feminist thought to be challenged, and ultimately anticipating third-wave feminist thought.

Placing *On Our Backs* in the Feminist Sex Wars

By the mid-1980s, when the first issues of *OOB* circulated, radical lesbian-feminists in the United States were concerned about whether certain types of sex could be feminist. Many radical feminists of the second-wave declared that heterosexual sex was an oppressive action because heterosexual male desire enforced the subordination of women. Lesbianism became a solution to escape this problem, and radical feminists co-created feminist thought alongside lesbians to suggest that lesbianism was a political and liberatory sexual identity that transcended patriarchal relationship dynamics and oppressive desire. Women who embraced both lesbian and feminist identities often deemed themselves “lesbian-feminists” or “women-identified-women” to illustrate that lesbianism and feminism were inseparable ideologies (Radicalesbians 105). Radical lesbian-feminists organized their activism around resisting violence perpetrated against women.

Anti-pornography feminists felt that pornography and sadomasochism or sexual pleasure gained from receiving or inflicting pain, embodied patriarchal violence, even if it was performed by other lesbian-feminists. Feminists like Adrienne Rich, Katherine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin conflated lesbians' participation in sadomasochism with oppressive masculinities, deeming it unacceptable (Musser 33). Dworkin openly engaged in discourse with the writers of *OOB*: she allegedly claimed that *OOB* was a reactionary, "woman-hating" magazine that was complicit in the rape of women (Bright, "Andrea Dworkin" 6). In her 1981 monograph *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin proposes that sadomasochism reinforces the misogynistic notion that "[a woman] finds her life confusing. She is without purpose. She needs guidance [...] For these reasons, she likes to be bound, gagged, humiliated, and badly hurt" (161-2). The assertions of Dworkin both informed and reflected popular beliefs within the lesbian-feminist movement: all practices of sadomasochism and all sadomasochistic pornography are extensions of patriarchy, even if the pornography is produced for and by other lesbian-feminists.

Anti-pornography lesbian-feminists were primarily concerned with depictions of violence in sadomasochism and failed to recognize the queer potentiality of focusing on pleasure—pleasure that women consensually received from participation in sadomasochism both in pornography and in real-life applications—as a way to achieve feminist consciousness. Although anti-pornography lesbian-feminists argued that lesbian participation in sadomasochism represented hatred of women, the editors of *OOB* insisted that the magazine represented queer pleasure and love. In response to Andrea Dworkin's assertion that *OOB* was a "woman-hating" magazine, Susie Bright, an editor for *OOB*, writes:

Andrea Dworkin never mentions *love* in her ravings about feminism, sex, and the oppression of women, but she does mention *hate* quite often. Conversely, *On Our Backs* loves women, sex, women having sex, women taking charge demanding what they want and getting it (Bright, "Andrea Dworkin" 6).

OOB embraced differing lesbian sexual expression, even if it fell outside of prescribed lesbian-feminist sexuality. In a 2013 interview between Jill Nagle and Debi Sundhal, a founder of *OOB*, Sundhal explains that anti-sex and anti-pornography rhetoric in the lesbian-feminist movement felt restrictive to the lesbian creators of *OOB*. In the interview, Sundhal also notes that she felt that lesbians had to desexualize themselves and deny aspects of their sexuality, like lesbian sadomasochistic fantasies, to fit into the second-wave feminist movement despite it being heavily associated with lesbianism (Nagle 158-160).

Affective Readings of *On Our Backs*

OOB published explicit, controversial, and sexy stories for “the adventurous lesbian” to resist anti-pornographic and anti-sadomasochistic rhetoric within lesbian feminism. The suggestive nature of these stories invites the reader to engage with the content of the magazine and the attendant reactions that arise through engagement. I analyze the stories “Daddy” and “Crybaby” through speculative reader reaction to demonstrate the affective reactions that may be triggered when reading erotica in *OOB*.

“My Daddy is very strict,” opens the fantasy story “Daddy” in the Fall 1988 issue of *OOB*. Debra Ann, the narrator, is sentenced to a writing assignment for disobeying the rules her Daddy, a butch lesbian, had set out for her. Taking up a male title to allude to extreme misogynistic subordination, Debra Ann’s Daddy controls every aspect of her life and ensures that she knows she is subject to discipline at all times. She is a “confused” girl, who is unable to differentiate right from wrong without the guidance of her Daddy’s rules and is therefore too weak-minded to make decisions or handle her own money (Wertheim 9). Not only is she unable to make her own decisions, but the misogyny she faces nearly withholds her from personhood as she is required to sleep on the floor, eat out of a bowl on the ground, and follow sets of rules and commands. Readers may have felt that Debra Ann is representative of the ultimate objectified, dehumanized, and submissive woman. “Daddy” and other pornographic stories featured in the magazine explore the complexity

of lesbian sexuality by making space for exploration of the eroticism of oppression. Considering that, oftentimes, readers were only familiar with sadomasochism through lesbian-feminist talking points, they may have felt sensations of anger and disgust from the described dynamic. However, the story also divulges into explorations of sexual pleasure for both Debra Ann and her Daddy. Although Daddy inflicts pain and humiliation through spanking, clitoral punishment, and public humiliation, Debra Ann is aroused by this pain, only deepening her devotion to her Daddy—a devotion that is perhaps desirable to the reader. The narrator’s enthusiasm about her submission soothes the reader’s apprehension and their potential feelings of shame, and encourages the reader to explore feelings of arousal brought about by the erotic storytelling that indulges in detailed descriptions of oral sex, orgasm denial, and masochism. The story may arouse the reader because of its detailed accounts of Debra Ann’s sexual submission, despite this submission’s association with misogynistic tropes, thus challenging acceptable lesbian sexuality.

Debra Ann’s submission to her Daddy is far from the most controversial story featured in *OOB*. The earliest issues of the magazine includes fantasy stories about violent themes that are understood to be oppositional to feminist thought, such as rape, murder, and children’s sexual fantasies.² The one-year anniversary edition of *OOB* features a pornographic rape fantasy titled “Crybaby.” The narrator is a cocky, confident butch woman who is taking public transportation to see a friend. Her self-assured demeanor draws in the reader, while the narrator’s notation of the public’s disapproval of her masculinity may garner sympathy from the lesbian audience. Once on the train, she begins masturbating and notices that people who already disapproved of her butch presentation express visible disgust. Filling her vagina with her fingers while a dildo sits in her anus, she moans loudly as she reaches orgasm in public. The unnamed narrator not only describes her orgasm, but also implies that her public masturbation was a way to challenge the normativity of the train commute, perhaps making her public masturbation an act of lesbian resistance. After the commute, the narrator arrives at her

² See “The Phoenix Chair” in *On Our Backs* vol. 3, no. 2, 1986; and “Sarah Jean Harper Came Last Night” in *On Our Backs*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1984.

destination—her friend’s house. Our cocky narrator knocks on the door and is met by her friend who is already skeptical of her intentions. The friend who greets the narrator at the door, a feminine woman in a silk blouse, asks where her dick (dildo) is. The narrator replies: “I’ll tell you where’s my dick. In my butt. I’ve had it held in place with the cock ring for ages” (f. 28). She bursts into the house, threatens the woman with a knife, and cuts off the woman’s blouse tying it around her eyes. She then pulls the dildo out of her asshole and proceeds to “rape [the woman] out of her wits” (f. 28). The act of violent rape potentially shocks the reader, but the narration invites the reader to feel arousal and sexual desire as the narrator describes the multitude of ways both women reach orgasm, inviting the reader to feel sexual satisfaction from the story. Despite both characters’ enjoyment of the woman’s rape, a reader may have questioned their status as a feminist if they felt aroused from reading the story, since rape fantasies were considered misogynistic. If they viewed the story as misogynistic, readers, then, may have felt anger and disgust towards the story. It is likely that “Crybaby” may have provoked anger, disgust and sexual arousal simultaneously. I infer that these competing feelings could invoke feelings of shame within readers since their sexuality no longer fit into the moral guidelines provided by anti-pornography lesbian-feminists. Estrangement from acceptable feminist sexual expression may have led to disillusionment with popular feminist thought, since it provoked the same feeling of sexual shame that was enforced by hetero-patriarchal powers within the United States. Hetero-patriarchal powers historically policed female and lesbian sexuality, and readers may have questioned why feminists insisted on continuing the tradition of shame provocation to control sexuality.

Contributors to the magazine expressed their concern about the shared agenda of conservatives and anti-pornography lesbian-feminists to police women’s sexual expressions and fantasies. Susie Bright writes that people are conditioned to reject sexuality that does not fit into the heterosexual norm and that women in particular face additional sexist stigma for embracing their sexuality (“Letters” 5). Bright further suggests that this stigma is intentionally created to punish women and “ostracize them from society” for being sexually informed (“Letters”

5). Therefore, shame created by both feminists and non-feminists is a manufactured tool that punishes sexual difference. To combat the oppressive nature of shame, the editors of *OOB* employed the use of queer sexual pleasure in their magazine.

In the groundbreaking work “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” Elizabeth Freeman notes that focusing on pleasure allows for the construction of history to be reimagined and proposes that historical consciousness can be raised through the academic recognition of queer practices of pleasure and eroticism. She proposes that analyses of queer bodily practices can function as “portals to historical thinking... time consciousness, and even historical consciousness, that can intervene upon material damage done in the name of [oppression]” (Freeman 60). In a state that punishes queer pleasure through the implementation of discourse that deems the queer as deviant, and therefore subject to carceral violence, Freeman proposes that embracing queer pleasure is a subversive and liberatory act. Thus, by focusing on queer moments of pleasure in *On Our Backs*, new consciousness can be raised to challenge oppressive systems of heteronormativity and female oppression.

Feminist Consciousness, Sadomasochistic Fantasies, and the Body

In the Fall 1984 issue of the magazine, the editors of *OOB* featured letters written in response to the content featured in the magazine’s first issue. These letters illustrate the affective reactions readers felt—disgust, relief, joy, and arousal—when engaging with *OOB*. Readers sent angry letters to the publishers with claims that pornography is opposed to lesbianism and feminism. One woman from Washington DC wrote in disgust: “For years we as lesbian-feminists have been fighting male pornography [...] I hope NEVER to see something like what you are selling in the name of lesbian liberation again” (Donna 3). Despite this sentiment echoing through some letters, others expressed joy—perhaps even a sense of relief—to finally see lesbian erotica (Linda 5). Even in its earliest days, *OOB* facilitated conversations between lesbian-feminists that anticipated the changing politics within the feminist movement

and created a supportive forum for women to participate in discourse about the liberatory nature of sexual expression. Together, the editors, contributors, and readers began reimagining a version of feminism that complimented their lived experiences and all corners of their desires.

The publishers of *OOB* were certainly aware of the magazine's position within the lesbian-feminist movement: the creators of the magazine regularly published non-fiction columns alongside erotica titled "Sextracts" and "Sexpoints" to contribute to political conversations within the feminist movement and lesbian and gay liberation movement. Additionally, these columns addressed pornography's role within activist movements. In a "Sexpoints" article subtitled "Is the Lesbian Sex Revolt Dead?" Peg Byron, a feminist journalist, urges lesbians to continue pursuing questions about their sexuality while addressing larger issues within the lesbian community to keep the lesbian sex revolution alive. Although she states that lesbian porn magazines like *OOB* are not capable of singlehandedly sustaining the lesbian-feminist sex revolution, she notes that both the pornography and non-fiction pieces in *OOB* and other lesbian porn magazines facilitate questions that provoke new feminist ideas, information, and ways of thinking (Byron 10).

The editors of *OOB* note that they publish stories like "Daddy" and "Crybaby" not only because they provide pleasure, but because it is important for women to be able to explore how bodily sensations can inform thoughts in a heteropatriarchy that restricts access to both. In a "Sexpoints" column, sex therapist Jill Bender discloses her increasing concern with the "attempt of certain feminists to limit or censor the expression of our fantasies in the media, particularly because of the ramifications it will have on [women's] sexual behavior" (10). She claims that for herself and many others, fantasies inform the full range of an individual's lesbian sexuality and consciousness. Fantasizing, and the feelings associated with these fantasies allow women to develop a sexual consciousness even if they depict "unacceptable" topics like rape, sex with men, or pain infliction (Bender 11). Bender notes that not all fantasies are pleasurable: some create feelings of discomfort, shame, and fear. She conceptualizes these negative feelings as sites for people to understand the limits of their sexuality more deeply (11).

Indeed, pornographic imagery, whether written, drawn, or photographed, exists to trigger affect—a bodily sensation. For feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and even Judith Butler, pornography brought about uncomfortable sensations—in a negative review of *OOB*, Butler describes feeling a “deep knot in [their] stomach” (Guy 155), as it disturbed them to see lesbians participating in such explicit sadomasochistic sex. For others—and assumedly the consumers of *OOB*—pornography may trigger pleasurable affective reactions, such as curiosity and arousal. Sadomasochistic pornography is concerned with triggering intense affective reactions for the consumer and the subject of the pornography by depicting intense bodily sensations through a variety of means, including bondage, pain, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, verbal degradation, or other methods. Bodily sensations help us discern where our bodies reside in our surroundings, therefore aiding us in situating where we reside both materially and ideologically. Upon reading Nietzsche, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze outlined how bodily sensations and bodily actions have epistemic potentiality in his book *Nietzsche in Philosophy*. Feminist author Elizabeth Grosz summarizes Deleuze’s argument on affect and epistemology as such:

Philosophy is best undertaken dancing, with joyous bodily affirmation with revelry and delight. Knowledge is the unrecognized effect of bodies that, through habits, errors of grammar and cultural imperatives, have been somehow misconstrued as conceptual or purely mental. Knowledge is the consequence of bodies, and in turn enables bodies to act or prevents bodies from acting, expanding themselves, overcoming themselves, becoming. (136)

Sadomasochism, which is inherently concerned with the body and bodily sensations, aids in decentering the mind as the only place where truth can be discerned.

The publishers and contributors of *OOB* acknowledge this process: recall how Jill Bender suggested that sitting with the attendant feelings sexual fantasies cause—even if they are uncomfortable—allows women

to develop sexual consciousness and learn the limits of their sexuality, and how Peg Byron suggested that lesbian-feminist pornography, an affective genre, triggered new ways of feminist thinking. Sundhal, Kinney, Bright, Cottrell, and the contributors to *OOB* felt that they resided in a stagnant feminist movement that no longer served women. Through *OOB*, the authors created a feminist ideology derived from feelings. This new ideology mirrored the ideologies of third-wave feminist thought, especially thought concerned with sexual difference that arose a decade after the initial release of the publication in 1984.

In 1996, Rebecca Walker, the author who coined the term “third-wave feminism,” wrote in the introduction of her anthology *To Be Real* that her life felt like a “feminist ghetto” before engaging with other young feminists (“being real” xxix). Reflecting on her time in this ‘feminist ghetto,’ she states: “every decision I made, person spent time with, word I uttered had to measure up to an image I had in my mind of what was morally and politically right according to my vision of female empowerment” (xxix). Walker and other third-wave feminists like the punk singers of the Riot Grrrl movement, who proudly displayed misogynistic words like “slut” on their bodies, redefined what tenets of feminism allowed for female liberation in an increasingly conservative American political environment (Mann 354).

Conclusion

Through use of personal narrative and lived experience, third-wave feminists imagined a women’s liberation movement that embraced sexual differences between women. In a political climate that promoted censorship and control of women’s bodies, third-wave feminists found themselves uninterested in the feminist tradition of policing women’s sexuality. Additionally, third-wave feminists emphasized the importance of personal knowledge-building as an essential way of understanding liberation and moved away from discerning feminist thought through the genre of academic theory (Mann 357). Like the creators of *OOB*, third-wave feminists moved the site of feminist epistemology outside of the confines of the academy and into the body’s

lived experience, and “into the very fiber of feminist’s lives” (Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave” 41).

The core tenants of third-wave feminism align heavily with the feminism that the editors and authors of *OOB* reimagined for themselves nearly a decade prior. Although initially introduced to feminism through the second-wave radical lesbian-feminist movement, the editors and contributors of the pornographic magazine felt that there was no need for feminists to further police the behavior of women in a patriarchal United States that dominated women’s sexuality and personhood. In opposition to major themes of the lesbian-feminist movement, *OOB* created a feminism that focused on the expression of female and lesbian joy and pleasure and embraced all feelings, even if they included disgust, fear, or shame. Embracing the affective reactions triggered while reading *OOB* pushed people to question the stifling stances of second-wave radical lesbian-feminists. Like third-wave feminists, the editors of *OOB* illustrated the diversity of sexual needs and resisted the notion that there was a “correct” way to be a lesbian, a feminist, and to experience sexual pleasure. Through the utilization of fantasy and queer joy, the editors and contributors of *OOB* used pornography as feminist praxis and as a way to challenge the anti-sex paradigm of the second-wave. Further research focusing on the magazine could look at how *OOB* illustrates diversity in gender expression, provides definitions of queerness, and explores masculinity within lesbianism through pornography.

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Biography

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