



## Feminist Un/Pleasure: Reflections upon Perversity, BDSM, and Desire

E. Gravelet

When you have only a handful of people who understand your way of life, their support becomes so important that no forgiveness for betrayal is even possible. Or so it would seem thus far. – Pat Califia 19

Every kinky feminist queer that I have ever spoken to loves *Macho Sluts*. Well, maybe I'm just lucky enough to know the right people, but there appears to be an overarching consensus that Patrick Califia's hotly controversial 1988 collection of dyke S/M smut should be considered a classic. Not unlike the experience of many contemporary queer folks, it was one of the first pieces of BDSM literature I unearthed that actually resonated with my lived experiences and desires, and it subsequently spent many years living on my bedside table, creased open to "The Finishing School." For a generation closely following Califia and his sex-positive peers, it might seem strange that this title would spur legal battles with the state or that its contents could contribute to the splintering of a thriving activist community. In 2000, however, *Macho Sluts* became a focal point in *Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium v. Canada*, the obscenity trials between Canada Customs and a small gay and lesbian bookstore situated in Vancouver, British Columbia. This collection of S/M erotica has had further impact on the infamous fragmentation at the heart of the feminist sex wars. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing to this day, the North American second-wave feminist movement has been starkly divided by vehement political disagreements surrounding sexuality and gender. Broadly speaking, early anti-porn feminists argued that pornography, sex work, and BDSM constitute violence against women, and were consequently deserving of indiscriminate censorship and state legislating. Conversely, sex-positive groups fronted by activists, writers, and academics like Gayle Rubin, Dorothy Allison, and Califia fought for women's sexual choice and the expression of their unique multifaceted pleasures, rallying against wide state-sponsored censorship (Bronstein 2011). The publication of *Macho Sluts* then, in its unprecedented and explicit exploration of women's kinky sex, bolstered a burgeoning sex-positive leather dyke community, while also aggravating an already provoked anti-porn opposition.

Although echoes of these devastating North American sex wars and anti-porn activism continue to haunt corners of various feminist and queer movements—such as the publication of Dworkin-reviving books like Robert Jensen's 2008 *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, or the seemingly unrelenting stereotype that all feminists hate porn—it nevertheless appears that their few faint cries can be easily challenged or avoided. Subsequently, while many contemporary feminists are at least aware of the histories of conflict that inform sex-positive feminisms today, there is perhaps a level of disengagement from the emotional weight of these formational battles. As a queer feminist scholar and artist, this is a disconnection that I have experienced with a certain ambivalence: a sense of synchronized tenderness



or kinship towards a past from which I am also affectively separated, and therefore struggle to perceive or experience. Nevertheless, these histories continue to deeply influence my work, activism, art, and life. The three short narratives that follow will thus begin to exemplify some of the fractures and mixed feelings that inform contemporary engagement with contested feminist sexualities and BDSM. These stories simultaneously pry feminist desire apart and pull it together, underscoring the ways that political experiences of sexuality can carry both suffering and pleasure, or pleasurable suffering.

The first time I was shaken by this feeling of proximity and disconnection was during an interaction with a professor during my Master's degree. At the time I was writing about feminist pornography, and was a typically defensive fresh-faced graduate student with a lot to prove. Feminist porn had raised my awareness of the explosive potentials of non-normative audio-visual expressions of queer sexuality, and I was ready to substantiate its revolutionary visions in one fell swoop. When I submitted the first draft of my thesis, my professor paused, looked at me incredulously and asked something along the lines of "have you even read *Pleasure and Danger*?" The fact that it had not occurred to me to speak to the Barnard Conference conflict, nor to substantially draw from Carole Vance's 1984 anthology, spoke to more than novice oversight. As a young queer scholar who had not experienced the turmoil first-hand, the conference simply didn't register as being overly important when talking about the feminist porn movement. Apart from the subsequent lecture I received on substantiated research, what has since stuck with me was the affect that I felt flood across my professor's desk: a mixture of feelings of disbelief, confusion, and perhaps sadness combined with indignation. I truly felt for the first time, in response to my omission, a taste of how significant the political divide had been and how devastating the results.

More recently, I witnessed comparable resonances when attending the 2014 Feminist Porn Conference (FPCon) in Toronto, Ontario. Founded and produced by sex-positive educator Tristan Taormino, and run in conjunction with the Feminist Porn Awards, the event provided an unprecedented platform for not only academics, but also activists, sex workers, artists, performers, directors, and producers to "explore intersections between feminism and pornography" (FPCon: Feminist Porn Conference). In her keynote address on Saturday evening, professor Lisa Duggan reminisced about feminist politics of the 1980s, and her involvement with some of the first sex-positive organizing around sex work, BDSM, and pornography. At that time she was establishing the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) and building new strategies for resisting anti-porn feminists who, until then, had garnered a strong public platform. While sharing stories of live debates with Catherine Mackinnon and auditoriums full of dykes split down the middle into "sides," Duggan stressed how thrilled she was to be at FPCon, how enormous were its accomplishments, and how stunning were its alternative visions. The traction and impact of the current feminist pornography movement and the scale of its reception would have been unimaginable in 1984. Bearing witness to this first hand account of a battle I had only ever read about was both entertaining and moving. Before shifting into her core arguments



surrounding neo-liberalism, sex work, and labour, Duggan surprised me with an offhanded remark about commonalities over the fault-lines. “We have a kinship with anti-porn feminism” she explained, “the ways that women receive violence is something we’ve all felt anger about...and its absolutely breathtaking to see that rage take over.”

I opened this editorial with a similarly casual yet profound comment by Califia, taken from the forward to the revised edition of *Macho Sluts*. In this new 2009 introduction, entitled “Please Don’t Stop: A Sex-Radical Pornographer Looks Over His Shoulder,” Califia traces firsthand tales of the sex wars and grassroots resistance, while also reflecting upon the impact of his personal transition from female to male. “When you have only a handful of people who understand your way of life,” he explains, “their support becomes so important that no forgiveness for betrayal is even possible.” Then, with a lingering hopefulness, he adds: “Or so it would seem thus far” (19). The “handful of people who understand your way of life” in this case are members of Samois, a lesbian-feminist S/M organization that Califia founded in the late 1970s. Samois is legendary for being the first of its kind, advocating for the compatibility of feminism and BDSM, producing kinky queer publications (*Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* being the most influential), all the while maintaining open discussion and continued activism (Rubin). At the commencement of the sex wars, the group “Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media” rallied against Samois’ organizing, strongly opposing all lesbian sadomasochistic practice, arguing that it was a ritualized form of violence against women. Regretfully, in 1983 after 5 years of work, Samois disbanded due to infighting. In Califia’s words, the intimacy within the group meant that “no forgiveness for betrayal [was] possible.” Paradoxically then, it was the need for support from such a small, tight-knit community that led to its final incommensurable disagreements.

By beginning with these separate yet interconnected tales, I aim to not only contextualize this issue on feminism and BDSM, but to frame it within its fractures. The generational difference between my professor and me, the uncomfortable ally-ship through anger named by Duggan in her reminiscence, and the unresolved disputes between members of Samois, each highlight only a few of the possible ambivalences and disrupted genealogies that inform feminist sexualities. Instead of providing a clear trajectory that leads to the feminist art and scholarship on BDSM in this special issue of *Feral Feminisms*, I trace its uncertain path, sown with mixed feelings. The surprising, yet breathtaking kinship between sex-positive feminists and anti-porn feminists, premised upon anger, forms a perverse connection or relationality; it generates a place where polarities overlap and fornicate. In *Macho Sluts*, Califia’s nostalgia for the “handful of people who understand” and the mourning that “we’ll never have a reunion where we swap reminiscences or congratulate each other for surviving” (19), underscores the tensions between subversive, utopian communities and the interpersonal disagreements that cause their dissolution. Finally, the experience of my professor’s frustration and sadness blurred through academic professionalism, highlights generational divides, missing archives, and the repercussions of institutionalization. These incoherencies establish a split when



beginning to think about feminist pleasure and unpleasure and their necessary, yet sometimes unnerving, connection (their un/pleasure). In the above examples, a rupture takes place in a seemingly cohesive experience: the affects of the past recalcitrantly and sporadically leak into the present; two vehemently dichotomized groups are suddenly united, tenderly even, over a common rage; and the desperate need for a common understanding and solidarity causes permanent fragmentation. Yet it is these moments of splitting apart which simultaneously, somehow, bring them back together. Therefore, these feminist sexualities encompass both enjoyment and suffering wrapped tightly around a complex politics of desire. This apparent contradiction of painful enjoyment also weaves throughout BDSM sexuality itself, where the lines between violence, sex, and love start to blur. In turn, this second issue of *Feral Feminisms* aims to complicate, untame, queer, and radicalize tumultuous un/pleasurable legacies by reflecting upon the current intersections between feminist desire and perverse sexuality.

The theme of this issue was also inspired by the work and discussion that came out of a course I facilitated at Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto in 2013. The graduate students, professors, and artists that attended the “Seminar in Perversion and Psychoanalysis” took it upon themselves to investigate explicit sex and BDSM in a hybrid academic and arts-based setting. We engaged with classic texts in psychoanalysis and perversion, such as the seminal works of Sigmund Freud, Richard von Kraft Ebbing, and Havelock Ellis; examined the medicalization of perverse discourses in the DSM; explored masochism and sadism through their namesakes—the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch; and interrogated contemporary perverse psychoanalytic theory through the lens of fetishism, disability, race, temporality, queerness, cyborgs, death, visual art, film, and narrative. Two foundational theories that recurred in these seminars and have since informed much of my thinking on BDSM are Freud’s early formulations on the two principles of psychic functioning and his later writings on the death drive. According to Freud in *Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning* (1911) pleasure and unpleasure are intimately bound. Our primary drive, aptly named the pleasure/unpleasure principle, encompasses both the unpleasure of an increase in excitation and the pleasure of its release. In other words, an individual’s relationship to unencumbered indulgence continually grapples with its denial. It is thus an integral part of socialization to apprehend the secondary process of psychic functioning, the reality principle, in which impulse control postpones gratification. Additionally, in 1920 Freud controversially argued that there are tendencies beyond the pleasure/unpleasure principle, and that through repetition formation, free flowing drive impulses propel “every living organism to restore to a prior state” (165). This new critical theory of the *death drive* countered the assumption that all drives pushed towards survival, change, and personal development.

Freud consequently based all human experience upon the precarious balance between pleasure and unpleasure, navigation of the demands of reality, and a drive towards the most primary desire of all: death. Additionally, although he has developed a reputation for wide pathologization of sexual difference, he was one of the first



theorists of sexuality to question the essentializing of inversion (queerness) as an innate character or degeneracy. He argued instead that all people are born bisexual, and that sexual orientation is acquired throughout early psychosexual development. Freud advised in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), that sexologists and clinicians must “loosen the bond that exists in our thoughts between the instinct and the object” (246), for all humans are latently polymorphously perverse. This is why children have little resistance towards carrying out perversions, both in aim and object, “since the mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust, and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in the course of construction” (268). Freud acknowledged the innateness of perversity by naturalizing its origins, questioning the normalization of a heterosexual aim, and writing extensively on masochism, sadism and fetishism. “Feminist Un/pleasure” therefore draws not only from diverse genealogies of feminism and BDSM, but also from an undercurrent of perverse psychoanalytic thought—those theories of innate drives that form primary psychic functioning and propel unrelenting desire.

Desire is a slippery concept, difficult to hold or describe, it is neither consistent nor interchangeable. An insatiable yearning for some is for others abhorrent and deserving of reprimand. The social complexities of perversion are always in flux, influencing diverse manifestations of sexuality and its censorship. Abundant BDSM practices play with these intricacies and incoherencies, exploring unique experiences of pleasure and pain through polymorphously perverse play in its multiple incarnations. Influenced by foundational psychoanalytic thought, this issue, “Feminist Un/Pleasure: Reflections upon Perversity, BDSM, and Desire” calls for diverse engagement with ambivalent genealogies of feminist perversion. It features theoretical, artistic, and narrative speculations on gender and power, canonical thinkers, subversive sexualities, performativities, intersectionalities, queerness, temporal resonances, erotic fiction, affect, politicizations, trauma, survival, and death, with the aim of illuminating the plentiful, yet undertheorized practices and approaches of feminist perversity and non-normative sexuality. As Califia muses “if we fall in love with the ‘wrong’ person, read something that unexpectedly excited us, see a piece of porn that has a surpassing impact, or listen to the far-out suggestion of a more experienced lover, we may find that we can’t take our core assumptions about ourselves for granted” (27). Hopefully, this kinky collaboration will render feral the reader’s assumptions, contributing to an unsettling and unhinging of taken for granted un/pleasures.

Appropriately, then, this issue starts with “The Wrong Desire.” This section provides an innovative and almost palpable introduction to the resonances of genealogies of the feminist battles surrounding BDSM. Through their creative works, contributors address some of the contradictions arising through seemingly incompatible ideologies. In “A Screenplay: My Own Private Sex Wars,” Ummni Khan experiments with form to dramatize her personal encounter with these conflicts as they were waged in personal spaces. A scene set in the early 1990s narrates two pivotal relationships, each of which trails the impacts of feminist conflict, divisive choices, and radical seductions. Relatedly, J. M. explores a repercussive feminist sexual taboo,



female masochism, and its relationship to male power. J. M.'s piece "Coming up for Air: Personal Reflections on Women's Masochism," stylistically juxtaposes personal narrative and feminist psychoanalytic theory in order to investigate the splitting of the female subject and corporeal masochistic desire. Underscoring the restorative potentials of BDSM, she sutures the self with intense bodily experience.

Throughout the second section, three scholars grapple with the precarity of fixed boundaries, using transformation to pervert their illusionary confines. In "Wanting (To Be) Animal: Fairy-Tale Transbiology in The StoryTeller" Pauline Greenhill retrieves fantasy and legend from heteropatriarchal censure by queering species boundaries. Through her analysis of the StoryTeller, Jim Henson's 1988 television series that retells old European folk tales, Greenhill explores transgressions of conventionally permitted desires between humans, non-humans, and their hybrids. Next, using the soft, permeable and vulnerable flesh of the tomato, Joseph Labine exposes the thin borders between pain and sex in "Tomatoes as Trauma." His poetry reveals the performativity of sexual trauma, while making use of cheeky metaphor and layered form to awaken the senses. In closing, Kara M. Manning further stretches the margins between the reader and text itself in her essay "Pleasure and Pain in Exquisite Extremes': Sexual/Textual S/M in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*." Grounding her work in linguistic encounters, Manning contemplates textual inter/course and the inherent sadomasochistic scene that readers encounter when consuming the classic novel *Wuthering Heights*.

In 1911, Freud wrote a short and obscure paper on what he called "The Uncanny." As he described it, an object or a situation evokes uncanniness when it is simultaneously familiar, yet threatening and terrifying in its familiarity. These bewildering concurrent sentiments of being attracted to and repulsed by something would often lead to the subject's persistent estrangement or apprehension. In the third section of this issue, "Uncanny, Fleishy Objects," the authors investigate these incoherent, perverse, and often unspeakable affects through performance, surrealist art, and experimental film. Anna Youngyeun, inspired by histories of feminist ordeal performance art, allows unabashed exploration of the limits of the body with "Invitation." This photographic series documents the audience's interactions with, and examination of her fleshy suspended protuberant form, hung naked inside a biomorphic lycra sack. Her open orifices invite curious and haphazard penetration. Jeremy Bell's essay, "Uncanny Erotics: On Hans Bellmer's Souvenirs of the Doll," further delves into the grotesque and objectified sexual body through an engagement with controversial German-born surrealist artist and writer Hans Bellmer. The 2011 exhibition in Berlin, "Double Sexus," staged a dialogue between Bellmer and Louise Bourgeois, both of whom are strikingly similar in their sexually charged, bodily fragmented, bulbous work that combines fantasy with horror. Yet, while Bourgeois has been celebrated as a canonical feminist artist, Bellmer has been accused of sexism in his raw explicitness. Bell's work grapples these claims, using psychoanalysis as a lens for Bellmer's notoriously uncanny dolls. This section concludes with three short experimental films by the BARBARISM collective, a multimedia project that aims to challenge social hierarchy through "individual multiplicities." Their pieces make use of cynical, dry, and camp



humour to exploit minimalist pornographic renderings of split, severed, or objectified flesh—a breast, nipple, pussy. Playing with the unpleasure of everyday harassment and abuse through the pleasure of queer feminist comedy, BARBARISM’s works interrogate politically charged, gendered social relationships traversed by object-relations theory and polymorphous perversity.

Progressing from the work of BARBARISM, the final pieces in “Feminist Un/pleasure” explore “Relationality and Reparation” by considering the ways that perversity, desire, and BDSM can be employed as tools for “working through” (Freud 1914) fractures. Using object relations theory, Melanie Klein (1964) famously argued that “reparation” is a key factor in successful childhood development. Reparation is the process of healing unconscious guilt carried by the subject because of their destructive urges towards a split loved object—for the infant, this fracture exists between the “good” and “bad” breast. In her work with Joan Riviere on the sources of emotion, Klein theorized that “hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused and [the child] becomes dominated by the impulses to destroy the very person who is the object of all his desires” (58). Yet by overcoming fantasies of the object’s omnipotence, and through the acceptance of both good and bad qualities of self and other, the subject may repair damage done to their internal world. In the first piece in this section, “It’s The Hard Knock Life: Sex, Shame, and Making Meaning,” I.A. Woody captures the therapeutic qualities of BDSM play through a narrative investigation of layered and shifting power hierarchies. In this piece, Woody makes meaning of fantasy and perverse sexuality through encounters with authority, clinical psychoanalysis, and role play. Tackling the wide pathologization of BDSM, he asks both erotically and platonically: “what if it is about trauma, and what if that’s actually ok?” Woody’s account is followed by the photo series titled “Profound Fluff: We Play it Deep” by Tania A., a spontaneous documentation of a kinky queer performance piece on the eve of Nuit Blanche in Toronto, Ontario. Coupled by a conversation between Leanne Powers, one of the co-creators, and Tania A., the photos capture an intricate web of exchanges, illuminating the reparative binding power of queer community, erotic art, and collective intentionality. Finally, the poetry of Karina Quinn recites the reverberating incidence of unadulterated desire. Pulling the reader into embodied relational memories, her prose yearns for the tenderness of secreting bodies and forbidden words made flesh. As Quinn potently articulates: “There is nothing more dangerous than this.”

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors, Danielle Cooper, Sara Rodrigues, and Ela Przybylo for all their brilliantly committed work, meticulousness, and keen expertise throughout the process of creating this issue. “Feminist Un/Pleasure” could not be possible without all those who contributed to the 2013 “Seminar in Perversion and Psychoanalysis.” Professor Allyson Mitchell, for letting us meet weekly at FAG (Feminist Art Gallery), contributing chocolate mint tea and Deep Lez insights; my supervisor Sheila Cavanagh who facilitated things on the bureaucratic end and helped us work through the muddled waters of psychoanalytic thought; and Kami Chisholm



for unabashedly encouraging my kinky scholarly endeavours, and forever talking theory with me after everyone else has already left. Additionally, thank you to all of those who submitted, including those whose contributions could not be included in the final issue. Your work has been a pleasure to behold and I sincerely hope that you continue to produce such fantastically perverted and queer feminist scholarship, art, and activism. Finally to my partner, Leah Henderson, who lovingly puts up with my nonsense and offers me endless support: thank you.

## Works Cited

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013. Print.
- Bronstein, Carolyn. *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement 1976-1986*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Califia, Patrick. *Macho Sluts* (1988). Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009. Print.
- FPCon: Feminist Porn Conference. *The Feminist Porn Conference, University of Toronto April 5-6, 2014*. Monday, March 31, 2014 UPDATE. 2013. Web. 6 May 2014. <<http://fpcon.org>>.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). *The Penguin Freud Reader*. Ed. Adam Phillips. London, England: Penguin Books, 2006. 132-195. Print.
- . "Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning" (1911). *The Penguin Freud Reader*. Ed. Adam Phillips. London, England: Penguin Books, 2006. 414-421. Print.
- . "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914). *The Penguin Freud Reader*. Ed. Adam Phillips. London, England: Penguin Books, 2006. 414-421. Print.
- . "The Uncanny" (1911). *The Uncanny*. Ed. Hugh Haughton. London, England: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003. Print.
- . "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905). *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. London, England: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989. 239-293. Print.
- Jensen, Robert. *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007. Print.
- Klein, Melanie and Joan Riviere. *Love, Hate, and Reparation*. New York: Norton, 1964. Print.
- Samois, eds. *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics On Lesbian S/M*. San Francisco, CA: Samois, 1981. Print.
- Rubin, Gayle. "Samois." *Leather Times: News from the Leather Archives & Museum*. Chicago, Illinois: Leather Archives & Museum, Spring 2004. Web. 6 May 2014. <<http://www.leatherarchives.org/resources/issue21.pdf>>.
- Vance, Carole. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. 1st ed. Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. Print.