

This brings us to another level: the fluidity and complexity of power differentials in s/m. Most people do not always hold top or bottom roles, but switch between them. More interestingly, s/m roles rarely match real relationship and real-world roles. Most important is the interdependency of top and bottom:

While it is true that S&M involves dominance and submission, it is seldom clear whether the sadist controls the slave, or the masochist controls the master. . . viewing S&M merely as a power relationship between two participants still misses one of its central characteristics. This is the ultimate unity of sadism and masochism. Rather than taking these to be polar extremes. . . [see them] as elements of the same erotic attitude.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of power in an s/m exchange goes against the grain of much contemporary feminist thinking, which is based on a victim/perpetrator model. This may be why many feminists find s/m hard to understand. S/m shows a type of power relationship in which the power of the dominator derives from the consent of the dominated and in which the participants are ultimately equal. This is part of the eroticism of s/m. It is also a way of seeing power that is very different from the hierarchical constructs in which even feminists have been trained.

### **Gender-Bending Sex**

Not surprisingly, the lesbian sex radical movement has been a haven for those who experiment with sex roles and for women who play with the boundaries of sexual orientation. One of the ways the sex radicals have rebelled against the feminist concept of woman-identified woman is by bringing back butch-femme roles. Joan Nestle has been particularly eloquent in her defense of herself as a femme and of the history of butch-femme in lesbian culture:

A butch lesbian wearing men's clothes in the 1950's was not a man wearing men's clothes; she was a woman who created an original style to signal to other women what she was capable of doing—taking erotic responsibility. In the feminist decades, the fem is the lesbian who poses this problem of misinterpreted choice in the deepest way. If we dress to please ourselves and the other women to whom we want to announce our desire, we are called traitors by many of our own community, because we seem to be wearing the clothes of the enemy. Make-up, high heels, skirts, revealing clothes, even certain ways of holding the body are read as capitulation to patriarchal control of women's bodies. An accurate critique, if a woman feels uncomfortable or forced to present herself this way, but this is not what I am doing when I feel sexually powerful and want to share it with other women. Fems are women who have made choices, but we need to be able to read between the cultural lines to appreciate their strength. Lesbians should be mistresses of discrepancies, knowing that resistance lies in the change of context.<sup>21</sup>

Nestle's analysis of butch-femme lesbian culture opposes that cur-

rently espoused by the movement, sociologists, etc., who say that butches and femmes of the fifties were only mimicking heterosexual culture, out of self-hatred and identification with the aggressor. Nestle's analysis of how an oppressed group can seize the symbols of political repression and turn them on their heads is reminiscent of the way the meaning of words like "nigger," "fag" and "dyke" were turned around by minority groups.

The existence and apparent erotic importance of butch-femme to lesbians raises further questions about the nature of sexual attraction. Try to disgender butch-femme, think of butch-femme as polarized aspects of personality, like being outgoing or shy. Imagine that our culture, and most others, have tended to assign these aspects to the opposite sexes, but that they actually have little to do with biological gender. If gender is divorced from biology, there could be more than two genders. If we consider the interaction of biology with these different aspects of personality, we can identify people not only by their physical gender but by their psychological gender as well. This could turn out to be a better basis for explaining erotic attraction than our current concept of sexual orientation, which relies only on biological gender.

Indeed, Newton and Walton have proposed a new schema for defining an individual's sexual preference that includes sexual orientation but goes beyond it. They also have a concept they call erotic identity (how one imagines oneself as an erotic object). Erotic identity is most typically modeled along gender lines but need not be. Erotic identity is more complex; it contains subcategories and refinements of the two-gender system. Newton and Walton distinguish erotic identity from erotic role, which corresponds most closely to active/passive or top/bottom and can be fluid or static.<sup>22</sup>

Sex radicals are experimenting in other ways with new views of gender. One of them is by their acceptance of bisexuality. This comes partly from their political commitment to support all types of "deviant" sexuality. It also comes from seeing bisexuality as a type of gender-bending. At least, bisexuality sees gender as drastically less important than it is for either homosexuality or heterosexuality. For some women, gender is less important than s/m identity; for others it is less important than some other aspect of personality. Still others are attracted only to butches or only to femmes—but they can be male or female butches or male or female femmes.

Gay male culture, at least before the ascendance of the "clone," provided numerous examples of gender-bending: the drag queen, the men who will only have sex with men dressed as women, the

weight-lifter with a diamond stud in his ear. The lesbian sex radicals celebrate the same kind of gender-bending in women. The lesbian who fistfucks a gay man, the lesbian who straps on a dildo under a pair of jeans and slips a condom on it to screw her female partner, the lesbian who wears garter belt and stockings in order to dominate her lover, are all playing with our concepts of gender.

### **Conclusion**

We need to celebrate the diversity of women's sexuality—whether it be gentle or wild and voracious, whether it be unified, easy to understand, complex or contradictory. We cannot do that until we stop passing judgments on each other's likes, dislikes, activities and desires.

The lesbian sex radical movement has the potential to be enormously liberating. Although it is difficult to assess the impact this movement is having on women's sexuality in general, I suspect there is beginning to be a ripple effect, at least within the lesbian community. Many lesbians have now been exposed to the movement and have had opportunities to hear diverse sexual experiences presented in a positive light. Recently I have begun to conduct sexuality workshops for lesbian and bisexual women in which I show lesbian-made video porn and other erotica and ask women to speak about their own sexuality. Two of the most common responses to the videos are "It validated what I already like to do but felt ashamed of" and "It gave me ideas of things to do that I never thought of before." If the sex radical movement can do these two things—alleviate sexual guilt and help create new modes of sexual pleasure—it will be of invaluable service to women.

On a more theoretical level, the example of lesbian sex radicals can teach us much about female sexuality. For instance, I have been told by both gay men and lesbians involved in s/m that women approach s/m differently than do men, with more concern for safety and consensuality, especially the subtleties of emotional safety and the ability to give true consent. If this is so, then perhaps women have a unique contribution to make in the area of sex: the development of a humanistic, rather than a moralistic ethic of sex.

Finally, their example can help us get past the constraints of gender. They can teach us how to step beyond simplistic renderings of sexuality, such as the essentialist/biological view, the patriarchal view, the pathology model and yes, the feminist model of sexuality. In short, they can show us meaning in previously unfamiliar and maligned acts and ways of negotiating sexuality.