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FROM
FETISH TO
FASHION
by michael
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s & m



S&M GIRLS

ungagging dyke sex

BY WICKIE STAMPS

As a journalist and burnt-out feminist, I have traveled, over the past three years, deep into dyke S/M territory. Despite the rumors I'd heard that these girls eat their young alive, I mustered up every ounce of my butch bravado and cruised into their all-girl leather events, play parties and dungeons. During these safaris, I interviewed some of their most notorious practitioners. At the start of this trek, I was a staunch lesbian-feminist. I faithfully clutched a copy of *Gyn/Ecology*,



by feminist Mary Daly, to my chest and kept a copy of *Female Sexual Slavery*, by Kathy Barry, at my bedside. Upon rising each morning, I would genuflect before a photo of Andrea Dworkin, a well-known feminist anti-pornographer, which hung over my bed. My wardrobe consisted of baggy healing-color pants and Birkenstock sandals. Not a drop of makeup contaminated my dyke skin. But I have to be honest. I did, upon occasion, perform dyke sex, but only in the dark—and missionary-style. Needless to say, I was reverently monogamous.

Now, three years later, as I sit before my computer, I have long red fingernails, I'm tattooed and pierced (in the tits and the nose), and I wear enough leather to keep a taxidermist in business for a few centuries. The room in which I write is piled to the ceiling with dirty dyke magazines, and every inch of available wall space is adorned with photos of S/M girls (including myself) in all degrees of undress. Nowadays, I'll fuck or fondle anything that is vaguely female, willing and within reach.

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Embedded in, and intersecting with, a number of different communities—separatist, gay male and heterosexual—the lives of S/M lesbians defy any simplistic notion of "lesbian community." Many S/M lesbians, such as members of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Women Hedonists into Pain, came out as S/M folk at women's music festivals and now live in a predominantly lesbian-only world. Others, such as members of Boston's T Bears, who hold their meetings in the local gay male leather bars, are more involved in the gay male S/M community. (In some parts of the country, such as Massachusetts, Oregon and Washington state, S/M lesbians share dungeon space with gay men and may engage in co-gender play). Members of co-gender clubs—the Esoterica Society, for example—have a great deal of contact with heterosexual men.

The individual perspectives and experiences of S/M lesbians are diverse. Some S/M lesbians came out more than ten years ago when there were no support groups, literature or means for contacting other lesbians and, despite the efforts of the feminist anti-pornography movement, forged groundbreaking support systems, publications and theoretical analyses. S/M lesbians coming out now reap the benefits of these hard-won networks.

Lesbian involvement in the leather-S/M-fetish scene varies widely. Some individuals dabble in S/M, indulging in an occasional night of light bondage, while others—title-holders, part-time professional dominants or service providers such as whip-makers or piercers—are steeped in the scene.

Among the sexual styles at the events and communities that I've encountered are cross-dressing lesbians, professional dominants, magnificent butch tops and fem bottoms—or fem tops and butch bottoms (some S/M lesbians switch from top to bottom or butch to fem). Individual sexual proclivities run the gamut of fetishes: leather and/or uniforms, bondage, discipline, cuttings or piercings. S/M lesbians may trade services for sex or seek out professional female dominatrices. Some S/M lesbians are strictly monogamous, while others prefer totally anonymous sex. There are also lesbians who meld sex and spirituality: During sexual scenes, they weave religious symbols and goddess fantasies with meditative dance, ritualistic cuttings and whippings. We are limited only by our imaginations.

despite the variety of experiences, perspectives and lifestyles, S/M lesbians have this in common: We have switched on our bedroom lights and moved beyond silent, genital- and orgasm-centered sex to new erotic terrain. Dildos, piercing, tattoos and even leather fashions (often seized upon by lesbians who actively distance themselves from S/M lesbians) have crept into the larger lesbian community and can be credited to lesbian sadomasochists from whose lives these practices have been appropriated.

Bushwhacking through pernicious sex-negative messages which have choked our passion, S/M lesbians are daring to speak—openly and honestly—about sex, especially lesbian sex. Whenever I've seen lesbian sadomasochists come together—in dungeons, at play parties or conferences—they talk about how they have sex, why they have sex and what they like and don't like.

S/M women have also fine-tuned the art of sexually approaching another lesbian. At support groups or in publications, S/M women school each other on how to respectfully—and successfully—approach another S/M lesbian

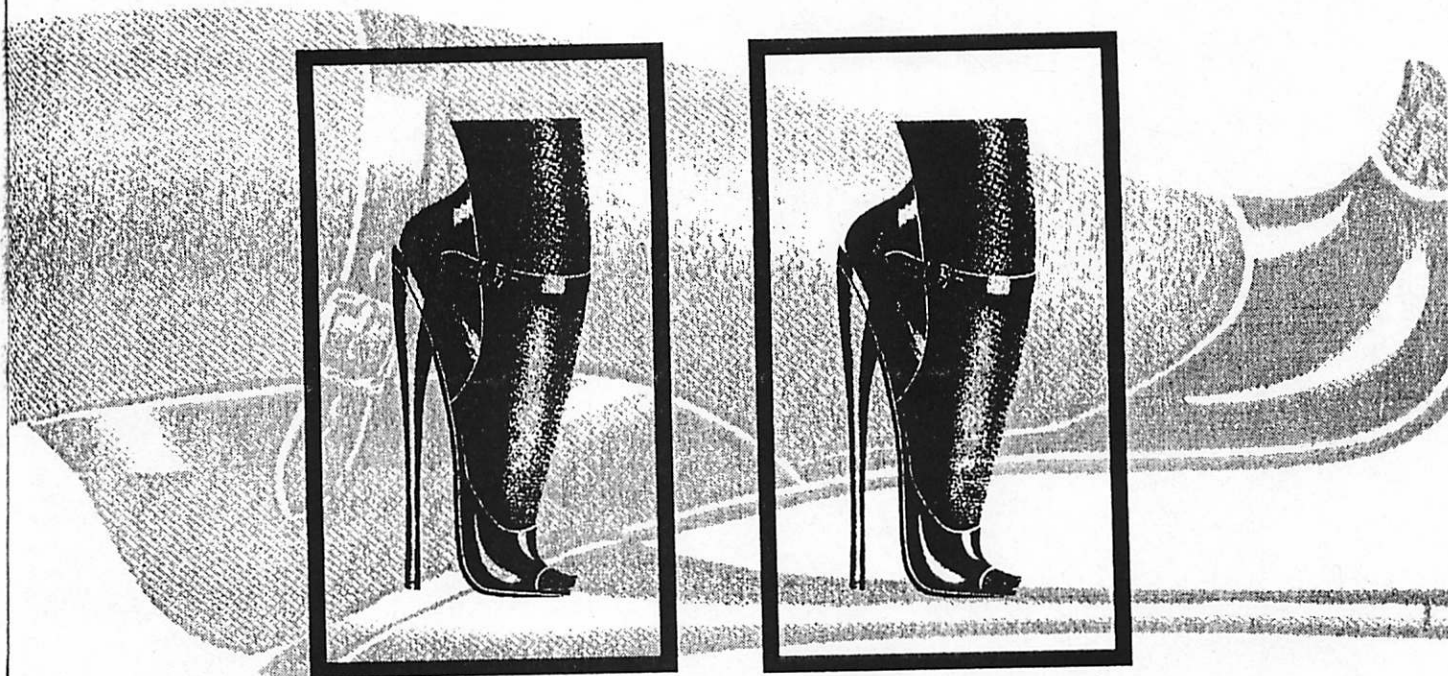
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(many S/M lesbians are even willing to act as sexual couriers—carrying written or verbal messages—between lesbians). S/M publications, such as *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual*, often encourage these dialogues and give tips on how to sit down with a chosen partner and—free of guilt and shame—discuss what you both want sexually.

Utterly unrecognized as leaders in the sexual arena, lesbian sadomasochists are at the forefront of lesbian safer-sex education. As early as 1984, publications such as *The Power Exchange* already had articles on "Women and AIDS"—years before most lesbians even knew that they *should* be aware of this health issue. In every dungeon I have visited, there were lists of safer-sex rules. There is also a long history in lesbian S/M support groups nationwide of teaching other lesbians about safer sex through writings and workshops.

S/M lesbians have even broadened the category of safer sex. Early on, they took note of the negative effect of mixing drugs, alcohol and lesbian sex and, in workshops, dungeons and publications, advocate for drug- and alcohol-free sex. I find it ironic—to say the least—that the primary accusation against S/M lesbians slung by anti-porn feminists is that lesbian sadomasochists are perpetuating violence against, and abuse of, women. My experience has been the exact opposite. I have discovered, throughout my travels, that it is the S/M lesbians who not only are teaching the prevention of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases but also have taken up—in a sex-positive manner—the issues of incest and rape, and lesbian sex. Instead of remaining victims to any history of abuse, S/M lesbians are active agents in figuring out how, despite emotional wounds, to reclaim themselves as sexual beings and participants in hot safer sex.



the visual images produced by lesbian S/M artists, such as Californian photographer J.C. Collins, document lesbians in hot pursuit of lesbian sex. Her work, which includes lesbians fisting other women, consensually dominating and submitting to each other or—arm-in-leather-clad-arm—celebrating S/M friendships, does not merely hint at lesbianism but portrays lesbians as active sexual beings.

Lesbian S/M entertainment also openly acknowledges lesbian lust. At the first dungeon I attended, hundreds of lesbians watched in rapt silence as an S/M lesbian stripper gyrated and beckoned for their adulation. Similarly, at the 1989 National Leather Association's Living in Leather conference, the performance of a young lesbian named Hawk, who fan-danced attired only in a G-string and dozens of bird tattoos, riveted her lesbian audience.

S/M lesbians also integrate a feminist politic into their erotic performances. During the 1990 International Ms. Leather fantasy segment (a standard part of leather competition), one lesbian made a memorable anti-rape statement: After riding her motorcycle onstage, she dismounted and rescued a sister lesbian from a rape attempt. Another fantasy segment highlighted a lesbian, in unison with a gay man, practicing the art of self-defense.

Not only are S/M lesbians opening up new frontiers in lesbian sex, they are also central figures in fending off the anti-sex theories of both the right wing and the feminist anti-pornography movement. You have only to flip through 10-year-old copies of *Gay Community News*, the *Advocate* and the *Body Politic* to find S/M lesbians, such as Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin, and the Boston Lesbian Sado-masochist Group, advancing sex-positive theoretical analyses of lesbian sexuality.

As activists, S/M women have tirelessly fought for sexual freedom. It is rare to find an anti-censorship battle that has not included S/M lesbians. Feminist political action/anti-censorship groups, such as the Bay Area Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force and its sister group in New York City (both of which are listed in the co-gender dungeon journal *Sandmutopta Guardian*), are often peopled by S/M women. Continuing this legacy of sexual-rights struggle, the Outcasts fought this year's banning of public play parties at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival: Drawing on her creativity, an S/M lesbian (who identified herself only as "Amelia Leatherheart") distributed 5,000 copies of articles documenting the festival's history of discrimination against S/M women.

Despite the attacks by the right-wing and the feminist anti-pornography movement, and the historical isolation of S/M lesbians from the larger lesbian community, S/M lesbians remain committed to lesbian sex—the first step that all lesbians, whatever their sexual leanings, must take to discover their lesbianism.

S/M lesbians refuse to let the women's movement slither into simplistic shortcuts and are vigilantly warning us of the snake-oil theories that feminist anti-pornographers sell as the definitive cure for violence against women. It is the S/M lesbians—female, queer and on the sexual fringes—who constantly remind us that what we are engaged in is a "sexual" revolution. The broader women's movement, which has repressed these women, ought to be mindful of this fact next time they ban S/M lesbians or their writings—for it may well be their sexual asses that are the next ones scheduled to be hung out to fry. ▼

Wickie Stamps has been writing on erotica and pornography for three years.