

Pat Califia, Public Sex: the Culture of Radical Sex, 2nd ed., 2000: Cleis Press.

A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality

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Is it true that gay women don't do SM? Generally, this is true. Men often require a high degree of resistance, whereas most women do not. The escalating effect that two men have on each other facilitates all forms of resistance, which is why SM is much more prevalent in gay male circles than it is among heterosexuals. With very rare exceptions, SM simply has no value for gay women.

—R.D. Fenwick, *The Advocate Guide to Gay Health*

The sexual closet is bigger than you think. By all rights, we shouldn't be here but we are. It's obvious that conservative forces like organized religion, the police, and other agents of the tyrannical majority don't want sadomasochism to flourish anywhere. Sexually active women have always been a threat the system won't tolerate. But conservative gay liberationists and orthodox feminists are also embarrassed by kinky sexual subcultures (even if that's where they do their tricking). "We are just like heterosexuals (or men)," is their plea for integration, their way of whining for some of America's carbon monoxide pie. Drag queens, leathermen, rubber freaks, boy-lovers, girl-lovers, dyke sadomasochists, prostitutes, transsexuals—we make that plan sound like such a feeble lie. We are not like everyone else. And our difference is not created solely by oppression or biology. It is a preference, a sexual preference.

Lesbian S/M isn't terribly well-organized yet. But in San Francisco women can find partners and friends who will aid and abet them in pursuing the delights of dominance and submission. We don't have bars. We don't even have newspapers or magazines with sex ads. I sometimes think the gay subculture must have looked like this when gay life first became urbanized. Since our community depends on word-of-mouth and social networks, we have to work very hard to keep it going. It's a survival issue. If the arch-conformists with their cardboard cunts and angora wienies had their way, we wouldn't exist at all. As we become more visible, we encounter more hostility, more violence. This article is my way of refusing the narcotic of self-hatred. We must break the silence that persecution imposes on its victims.

I am a sadist. The polite term is "top," but I don't like to use it. It would dilute my image and my message. If someone wants to know about my sexuality, she can deal with me on my own terms. I don't particularly care to make it easy. S/M is scary. That's at least half its significance. We select the most frightening, disgusting, or unacceptable activities and transmute them into pleasure. We make use of all the forbidden symbols and all the disowned emotions. S/M is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent.

I identify more strongly as a sadomasochist than as a lesbian. I hang out in the gay community because that's where the sexual fringe starts to unravel. Most of my partners are women, but gender is not my boundary. I am limited by my own imagination, cruelty, and compassion, and by the greed and stamina of my partner's body. If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I'd pick the boy. This is the kind of sex I like—sex that tests physical limits within a context of polarized roles. It is the only kind of sex I am interested in having.

I am not typical of S/M lesbians, nor do I represent them. In fact, because I define myself as a sadist, I am atypical. Most S/M people prefer the submissive, bottom, or masochistic role. The bulk of porn (erotic, psychoanalytic, and political) that gets written about S/M

focuses on the masochist. People who do public speaking about S/M have told me they get a more sympathetic hearing if they identify as bottoms. This makes sense in a twisted kind of way. The uninitiated associate masochism with incompetence, lack of assertiveness, and self-destruction. But sadism is associated with chainsaw murders. A fluffy sweater type listening to a masochist may feel sorry for her but will be terrified of me. I'm the one who is ostensibly responsible for manipulating or coercing the masochist into degradation—all 130 pounds and five feet, two inches of me. Therefore, my word is suspect. It is nevertheless true that my services are in demand, that I respect my partners' limits, and that both (or all) of us obtain great pleasure from a scene. I started exploring S/M as a bottom, and I still put my legs in the air now and then. I have never asked a submissive to do something I haven't done or couldn't do.

In addition to being a sadist, I have a leather fetish. If I remember my Krafft-Ebing, that's another thing women aren't supposed to do. Oh, well. Despite the experts, seeing, smelling, or handling leather makes me cream. Every morning before I go out the door, I make a ritual of putting on my leather jacket. The weight of it settling on my shoulders is reassuring. Once I zip it, turn up the collar, and cram my hands into the pockets, the jacket is my armor. It also puts me in danger by alerting the curious and the angry to my presence when I wear it on the street.

I get all kinds of reactions. Voyeurs drool. Queer-baiting kids shout or throw bottles from their cars. Well-dressed hets, secure in their privilege, give me the condescending smile of the genital dilettante. Some gay men are amused when they see me coming. They take me for a fag hag, a mascot dressed up to avoid embarrassing my macho friends. Others are resentful. Leather is their province, and a cunt is not entitled to wear the insignia of a sadomasochist. They avoid my shadow. I might be menstruating and make their spears go dull. When I visit a dyke bar, the patrons take me for a member of that nearly extinct species, the butch. Femmes under this misapprehension position themselves within my reach, signaling their availability but not bothering to actively pursue me. They seem to expect me to do everything a man would except

knock them up. Given the fact that I prefer someone to come crawling and begging for my attention and work pretty damned hard before she gets it, this strikes me as very funny. In women's groups, the political clones and the Dworkinites see my studded belt and withdraw. I am obviously a sex pervert, and good real true lesbians are not sex perverts. They are high priestesses of feminism, conjuring up the wimmin's revolution. As I understand it, after the wimmin's revolution sex will consist of wimmin holding hands, taking off their shirts, and dancing in a circle. Then we will all fall asleep at exactly the same moment. If we didn't all fall asleep, something else might happen—something male-identified, objectifying, pornographic, noisy, and undignified. Something like an orgasm.

This is why they say leather is expensive. When I wear it, disdain, amusement, and the threat of violence follow me from my door to my destination and home again. Is it worth it? Can the sex be that good?

If I'm interested in a woman, I call her up and ask if she'd like to go out for dinner. I have never picked up a stranger in a bar. My partners are friends, women who strike up acquaintances with me because they've heard me talk about S/M, and women I know from Samoa. (I also have a lover who is my slave. We enjoy conducting joint seductions or creating bizarre sexual adventures to tell each other about later.) If she agrees, I will tell her where and when to meet me. Over dinner I begin to play doctor—Dr. Kinsey. I like to know when she started being sexual with other people; if and when she started masturbating; if and how she likes to have an orgasm; and when she came out as a lesbian (if she has). I give her similar information about myself. Then I ask about her S/M fantasies, and if and how she has acted them out. I also try to find out if she has any health problems, such as asthma or diabetes, that might limit our play.

This conversation need not be clinical. It is not an interview—it is an interrogation. I am taking for granted my right to possess intimate information about my quarry. Giving me that information is the beginning of her submission. The sensations this creates are subtle, but we both begin to get turned on.

I will probably encourage her to get a little high. I don't like playing with women who are too stoned to feel what I am doing, nor do I want someone shedding inhibitions because of a chemical she's ingested. I prefer to deny a bottom her inhibitions. However, I do like her to feel relaxed and a little vulnerable and suggestible.

If there's time, we may go to a bar. Socializing in gay men's leather bars is problematic for lesbians. I prefer bars where I know some of the bartenders and patrons. I rarely have been refused admittance, but I have been made uncomfortable by men who saw me as an intruder. If there were women's bars that didn't make me feel even more unwelcome, I'd go there. Since I am a sadomasochist, I feel entitled to the space I take up in men's bars. I sometimes wonder how many of the men exhibiting their leather in the light from the pinball machines go home and really work it out and how many of them settle for fucking and sucking.

A leather bar provides a safe place to establish roles. I order my submissive to bring me a drink. She doesn't get a beer of her own. When she wants a drink, she asks me for one, and I pour it into her mouth while she kneels at my feet. I will begin to handle her, appraising her flesh, correcting her posture. I fondle or expose her so that she feels embarrassed and draws closer to me. I like to hear her ask for mercy or protection. If she isn't already wearing a collar, I will put one on her, drag her over to a mirror—behind the bar, in the bathroom, on a wall—and make her look at it. I watch her response very carefully. I don't like women who collapse into passivity, whose bodies go limp and whose faces go blank. I want to see the confusion, the anger, the turn-on, the helplessness.

As soon as I am sure she is turned on (something that can be ascertained with an index finger if I can get her zipper down), I hustle her out of there. I especially like to put her in handcuffs and lead her out on a leash. This is one of the gifts I offer a submissive: the illusion of having no choice, the thrill of being taken.

The collar will keep her aroused until we reach my flat. I prefer to play in my space since it's set up for bondage and whipping. I order her to stay two steps behind me, which reassures her that we really are going to do a scene. As soon as the door is locked behind

us, I order her to strip. In my room, there is no such thing as casual nudity. When I take away a woman's clothing, I am temporarily denying her humanity with all its privileges and responsibilities.

Nudity can be taken a step further. The bottom can be shaved. A razor removes the pelt that warms and conceals. My lover/slave has her cunt shaved. It reminds her that I own her genitals and reinforces her role as my child and property.

Shedding her clothes while I remain fully dressed usually is enough to shame and excite a bottom. Once she is naked, I put her on the floor, and there she stays until I move her or raise her up. I stand over her, trail a riding crop down her spine, and tell her that she belongs underneath me. I talk about how good she's going to make my cunt feel and how strict I am going to be with her. I may allow her to embrace my boots. After delineating her responsibilities and cussing her out a little for being easy, I haul her up, slap her face, hold her head against my hip while I unzip, and let her feast on my clit.

I wonder if any man could understand how this act of receiving sexual service feels to me. I was taught to dread sex, to fight it off, to provide it under duress or in exchange for romance and security. I was trained to take responsibility for other people's gratification and to pretend pleasure when others pretend to have my pleasure in mind. It is shocking and profoundly satisfying to commit this piece of rebellion, to take pleasure exactly as I want it, to exact it like tribute. I need not pretend I enjoy a bottom's ministrations if they are unskilled, nor do I need to be grateful.

I like to come before I do a scene because it takes the edge off my hunger. For the same reason, I don't like to play when I am stoned or drunk. I want to be in control. I need all my wits about me to outguess the bottom's needs and fears, take her out of herself, and bring her back. During the session, she will receive much more direct physical stimulation than I will. So I take what I need. From her mouth she feeds me the energy I need to dominate and abuse her.

While I am getting off, I usually begin to fantasize about the woman on her knees. I visualize her in a certain position or a certain role. This fantasy is the seed from which the whole scene

sprouts. When she's finished pleasing me, I order her to crawl onto my bed, and I tie her up.

Bottoms tend to be anxious. Because there is a shortage of tops, they compensate by playing all kinds of little psychological numbers on themselves to feel miserable and titillated. They also like to feel greedy and guilty, and they get anxious about that. The bondage provides reassurance. She can measure the intensity of my passion by the tightness of my knots. It also puts an end to bullshit speculation about whether I am doing this just because she likes it so much. I make sure there's no way she can get loose on her own. Restraint becomes security. She knows I want her. She knows I am in charge.

Being tied up is arousing, and I intensify this arousal by teasing her, playing with her breasts and clit, calling her nasty names. When she starts to squirm, I begin to rough her up a little, taking her to the edge of pain, the edge that melts and turns over into pleasure. I move from pinching her nipples with my fingers to pinching her nipples with a pair of clamps that makes them ache and burn. I may put clips all over her breasts or on her labia. I will check her cunt to make sure it's still wet and tell her how turned on she is—if she doesn't already know. At some point, I always use a whip. Some bottoms like to be whipped until they are bruised. Or she may be excited by the image of the whip coming toward her and may want to hear the sound of it whistling in the air or feel the handle moving in and out of her. A whip is a great way to get a woman to be here *now*. She can't look away from it, and she can't think about anything else.

If the pain goes beyond a mild discomfort, the bottom will probably get scared. She will start to wonder, "Why am I doing this? Am I going to be able to take this?" There are many ways to get her past this point. I may ask her to take it for me, because I need to watch her suffer. Or I may administer a fixed number of blows as a punishment for some sexual offense. I may convince the bottom that she deserves the pain and must endure it because she is "only" a slave. Pacing is essential. The sensations need to increase gradually. The particular implement involved may also

be important. Some women who cannot tolerate whipping have a very high tolerance for other things—nipple play, hot wax, enemas, or verbal humiliation.

When I am playing bottom, I don't use pain or bondage for its own sake. I want to please. The top is my mistress. She has condescended to train me, and it is very important to me to deserve her attention. The basic dynamic of S/M is the power dichotomy, not pain. Handcuffs, dog collars, whips, kneeling, bondage, tit clamps, hot wax, enemas, penetration, and giving sexual service are all metaphors for the power imbalance. However, I must admit that I get bored pretty fast with a bottom who is not willing to take any pain.

The will to please is a bottom's source of pleasure, but it is also a source of danger. If the top's intentions are dishonorable (e.g., emotional sabotage), or her skill is faulty, the bottom is not safe when she yields. Tops compete to be worthy of the gift of submission. Someone who makes mistakes gets a bad reputation very fast, and only inexperienced or foolish bottoms will go under for her.

Why would anyone want to be dominated, given the risks? Because it is a healing process. As a top, I find the old wounds and unappeased hunger. I nourish. I cleanse and close the wounds. I devise and mete out appropriate punishments for old, irrational "sins." I trip up the bottom, I see her as she is, and I forgive her and turn her on and make her come, despite her feelings of unworthiness or self-hatred or fear. We are all afraid of losing, of being captured and defeated. I take the sting out of that fear. A good scene doesn't end with orgasm—it ends with catharsis.

I could never go back to tweaking tits and munching cunt in the dark, not after this. Two lovers sweating against each other, each struggling for her own goal, eyes blind to each other—how appalling, how deadly. I want to see and share in every sensation and emotion my partner experiences, and I want all of it to come from me. I don't want to leave out anything. The affronted modesty and the hostility are as important as the affection and lust.

The bottom must be my superior. She is the victim I present for the night's inspection. I derive an awful knowledge from each gasp, the tossing head, the blanching of her knuckles. In order to force

her to lose control, I must unravel her defenses, breach her walls, and alternate subtlety and persuasion with brutality and violence. Playing a bottom who did not demand my respect and admiration would be like eating rotten fruit.

S/M is high-technology sex. It is so time-consuming and absorbing that I have no desire to own anyone on a full-time basis. I am satisfied with her sexual submission. This is the difference between real slavery or exploitation and S/M. I am interested in something ephemeral—pleasure—not in economic control or forced reproduction.

This may be why S/M is so threatening to the established order and why it is so heavily penalized and persecuted. S/M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class. My own needs dictate which role I will adopt.

Our political system cannot digest the concept of power unconnected to privilege. S/M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our system and seeks to reclaim them. There's an enormous hard-on beneath the priest's robe, the cop's uniform, the president's business suit, the soldier's khakis. But that phallus is powerful only as long as it is concealed, elevated to the level of a symbol, never exposed or used in literal fucking. A cop with his hard-on sticking out can be punished, rejected, blown, or you can sit on it, but he is no longer a demigod. In an S/M context, the uniforms and roles and dialogue become a parody of authority, a challenge to it, a recognition of its secret sexual nature.

Governments are based on sexual control. Any group of people that gains access to authoritarian power becomes an accessory to that ideology. These groups begin to perpetuate and enforce sexual control. Women and gays who are hostile to other sexual minorities are siding with fascism. They don't want the uniforms to degenerate into drag—they want uniforms of their own.

As I write this, there is a case in Canada that will determine whether or not S/M sex between consenting adults can be legal. This case began when a gay male bathhouse that caters to an S/M clientele was raided. After that raid, a man in Toronto was busted for "keeping a common bawdy house." The "bawdy house" was a

room in his apartment he had fixed up for S/M sex. Yet another man was busted for false imprisonment and aggravated assault. These charges stemmed from an S/M three-way.

In San Francisco, months before Moscone and Milk were assassinated and the cops smashed into the Elephant Walk, half the leather bars in the Folsom Street area had lost their liquor licenses due to police harassment. The Gay Freedom Day Parade Committee tried to pass a resolution that would bar leather and S/M regalia from the parade.

I don't know how long it will take for other S/M people to get as angry as I am. I don't know how long we will continue to work in gay organizations that patronize us and threaten us with expulsion if we don't keep quiet about our sexuality. I don't know how long we will tolerate the "feminism" of women's groups who believe that S/M and pornography are the same thing and claim that both cause violence against women. I don't know how long we will continue to run our sex ads in magazines that feature judgmental, slanderous articles about us. I don't know how long we will continue to be harassed and assaulted or murdered on the street, or how long we will tolerate the fear of losing our apartments or being fired from our jobs or arrested for making the wrong kind of noise during some heavy sex.

I do know that when we start to get angry, walk out, and work for our own cause, it will be long overdue.