This piece is drawn from a talk that was given to a number of groups between March and September 1983 in response to a growing movement among feminists to identify pornography as dangerous to women. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon then proposed their anti-pornography Civil Ordinance which tried to put into law the claim that “pornography is central in creating and maintaining the civil inequality of the sexes.” In February 1986, the Ordinance was declared a violation of First Amendment rights by the U.S. Supreme Court. The questions remain: How should feminists who want to change sexual culture deal with pornography? In which activist direction can we seek a sexual liberation for women that goes beyond the neutral, unembellished promise of the First Amendment?

There is a storm brewing in the women’s liberation movement over sexual politics. This is not to say the women’s movement is by any means limited to the current debates about pornography. But when a woman today goes searching for the feminism she’s heard about, that has called her, she is likely to encounter the antipornography movement, with its definition of sex and sexual imagery as continuous zones of special danger to women. Of late, this has been one burning tip of feminism where energy and feeling collect.

These heated feelings recall the passions that fueled the early days of the present wave of feminism, that fueled the pro-choice movement and the women’s health movement—both also about that contested terrain, the female body. As a veteran of those years, I remember how empowering that anger was, how it opened the eyes and cleansed the blood. We must indeed act out of what we feel or be cut off from the deepest sources of energy and political authenticity.

Nonetheless, I want to argue here that we need to know more about these feelings, or else run the risk of creating a strategy likely to move us away from the very things we say we desire. I want to argue that, in general, today’s anti-pornography campaigns achieve their energy by mobilizing a complex amalgam of female rage, fear and humiliation in strategic directions that are not in the long-term best interests of our movement. A politics of outrage—which can be valuable and effective—can also seriously fail women in our efforts to change the basic dynamics of the sex-gender system.

Both in Canada and the United States in 1984, feminists have moved in the forefront of new political alliances pledged to combat pornography through legal means. Canadians have emphasized municipal bylaws, licensing and reforms to the Criminal Code, while U.S. anti-pornography activists are trying to use civil rights legislation as the basis of civil suits. These U.S. laws—now being proposed and tested in court—would allow an individual to claim damages if a public utterance could be defined as “the sexually explicit subordination of women.” What does it mean in Mulroney’s Canada or Reagan’s America to demand new legal means to regulate public sexual imagery? How have we come to this strategic and theoretical point in the history of feminist thinking and activism about men’s and women’s sexuality?

All that I think about activism centered on the symbolic terrain of the sexual has developed in the atmosphere of the remarkable new work of feminist historians and theorists such as Carl Degler, Ellen DuBois, Barbara Epstein, Kate Ellis, Linda Gordon, Mary Hartman, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Gayle Rubin, Carole Vance and Judy Walkowitz. They provide a frame through which I see women’s present efforts to gain sexual autonomy. This work suggests that though there were exceptions, most of the North American activist women who spoke of the importance of sex in the course of the nineteenth century spoke of how hard it was for women to gain control of their bodies within marriage—to control pregnancy. In
this effort, middle-class women struggled to establish themselves as moral authorities. Even some of the most radical nineteenth-century activists accepted a general moral scheme in which men were sexual predators, fallen women were victims, and married, middle-class women were sexually pure.

In other words, the vast majority of nineteenth-century feminists accepted a model of society that not only assumed that men and women live in separate spheres, do different social tasks, but also that they have essentially different sexual and moral natures. Vulnerable on many fronts, nineteenth-century women chose organizing strategies to gain protection that confirmed gender differences.

If one narrows one's focus to these women, to the last major wave of feminism in the nineteenth century, male and female can look like two fixed, clearly defined categories, almost like two species. But as soon as one draws back and takes a longer view, these sharply defined gender distinctions begin to blur and shift. In the West in the last 150 years or so, the idea that gender is a particularly clear or useful principle by which to organize social life has been steadily eroded. We continue to cling to gender identity, of course—who, we wonder, would we be without it?—but gender keeps changing on us. Take, for example, the mothers of the young women who initiated the present wave of the women's movement. Born into a world where women couldn't vote, either forced to work or discouraged from working, depending not on gender but on class, rushed into the factories during World War II, then out of them again when the real men came home, this generation of women experienced—within one lifetime—four or five fundamentally different versions of what a women is and does. They had reason to whisper into their daughters' ears that a woman might need to be any number of things.

Each wave of feminism has come a bit closer to facing this frightening malleability of gender. At the start of the present women's movement, we flirted with this idea as never before. Though Anne Koedt wrote in the seminal essay, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," that female sexuality was utterly different and out of synchronization with male, other theorists, such as Shulamith Firestone (The Dialectic of Sex), were saying the opposite, that gender and sexuality were separable, that sex could be set free from the old gender boundaries, that birth control and the chance of economic independence outside the family were going to make a tremendous difference, were going to change what being a woman can mean. For a brief, heady moment, women as different as Koedt and Firestone joined to proclaim the right to demand a sexuality more centered on female pleasure. Though consciousness-raising groups discussed rape and spent long sessions detailing "what men do to us around sex," their predominant mood was one of hope: we felt we could fight our oppression effectively.

But gradually the mood of the women's movement changed and its organizing shifted in emphasis. In general, there was a move away from insisting on the power of self-definition—think of the Lavender Menace, or the early celebration of the vibrator, or the new heterosexual imperative that one should demand from men exactly what one wanted sexually—to an emphasis on how women are victimized, how all heterosexual sex is, to some degree, forced sex, how rape and assault are the central facts of women's sexual life and central metaphors for women's situation in general. How did a sector of the movement come to say that violence and rape are the fundamental causes of sexism, rather, for example, than child-rearing practices or economic inequalities? Why did the many powers of men to control women in a complex and heterogeneous society such as our own get telescoped into the single power of the male fist?

My answers to these questions are speculative and the following generalizations are not meant to imply that all antipornography campaigns have the same sources, content or political goals. Nor do I want to overstate the shift in movement priorities. Nearly all the current formulations of sexual issues in this wave of feminism were already present in the intense intellectual melee of 1969 to 1972. The changes are emphasis, of visibility, of strategy. We are faced now with the task of exploring the various strands of the ideological web we've been weaving all along, discovering and facing the contradictions that are inevitable in a movement as rich, as broadly based, as our own. There are many variables here—both inside and outside the dynamics of our own political groups.

Let me take it as emblematic and not a coincidence that in the United States pornography became a much publicized focus for feminist organizing around 1977, the same year that the U.S. Supreme Court began seriously to undermine the right to abortion it had only established in 1973. By ruling that women could not use Medicaid funds for
In this time of backlash, some feminists seem to be reasoning that if the state is impervious to our attacks, perhaps we can compel its unchecked strength to our service. Maybe, this argument goes, the masculine power structure that resisted the ideology of equality will listen more attentively to the ideology of difference. The antipornography movement posits a male sexual drive that is intrinsically violent, different in kind from a more consensual and loving female sexual nature. If equality and gender-blind institutions are unobtainable, if they are fantasies of sameness that bury women's particular sexual and psychological condition and obscure the phobic male reaction to women, then, these feminists reason, why continue demanding equality? Why not demand instead specific recognition in law and custom of women's special nature and vulnerability?

The logic of this argument is compelling, but it collapses a theoretical tension that was clear and vibrant earlier, a tension between recognizing the specific situation of women with all the strengths that proceed from it and, at the same time, attacking the female role, the female myth. In other words, female difference, the special culture of women, is a source of movement strength and authenticity while the idealization of femaleness tends to undermine the movement's power to challenge the status quo. Though some antipornography theorists pay lip service to this distinction between women and the abstraction, Woman, almost all opt for a politics that defines male and female as relatively fixed, timeless categories. For these theorists, history is nothing but a record of female frustration and sexual slavery. Things are going badly now because for women they always go badly. For these feminists, only a profound and enduring difference between the sexes seems an adequately powerful explanation of why changes we wish for are so slow in coming.

One reason, then, why the antipornography movement became a focus of feminist energy in the late '70s lies in its claim to explain the recalcitrance of the male power structure. And at the same time that external events seemed to mock earlier feminist high expectations, internal movement difficulties also made this emotionally vivid, symbolic campaign attractive. We had created revolutionary institutions, battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, and the women who worked in them began to explore the complexity of female victimization. We learned from them not only about the variety of ways in which men brutalize women but also about how women internalize this oppression, weakening our capacity to resist. The women's movement set out to name male crimes formerly invisible—rape, wife battering, sexual harassment—and at first this naming was power in itself. For example, sexual harassment at work used to be socially invisible; it was accepted as a natural event, never seen as an injustice. Now, after years of effective feminist political action, in many an administrator's drawer lies a plan for what to do with a sexual harassment charge.

But rather than seeing this as a step forward in economic and social power, however small, our movement began to be frightened by what it had brought to light. Visibility created new consciousness, but also new fear—and new forms of old sexual terrors: sexual harassment was suddenly everywhere; rape was an epidemic; pornography was a violent polemic against women. It was almost as if, by naming the sexual crimes, by ending female denial, we frightened ourselves more than anyone else.

Pornography became the symbol of female defeat: Look, they hate us, we could say, pointing to a picture. Far less colorful instances of male dominance surround us: institutionalized sexism that needs no lurid, not to mention...
stigmatized, representations of naked women to make itself felt. But this engrained system of masculine power has proved far harder to attack.

Antipornography theory offers relief in the form of clear moral categories: there are victims and oppressors. As in the nineteenth-century debates on sex, lust is male, outrage female. But why should such solid, high boundaries between the genders comfort modern feminists? One reason must be our own uncertainties and anxieties about the present fluidity of gender imagery and identity. Nor are these anxieties unjustified: There is no guarantee that shifting gender definitions are in themselves progressive, leading inevitably to increased flexibility and choice. Nonetheless, in the midst of disturbing change, we must recognize, too, our opportunities—and celebrate our triumphs. In spite of backlash and our own failures, the women's movement has made enduring changes in how everyone thinks about women.

Instead of recognizing that the new visibility of women's sexual victimization is a great leap forward, some feminists are drawing energy from the assertion that women's situation is fast deteriorating. They have, I believe, lost sight of the larger historical truth: the women of the nineteenth century belonged to their husbands or fathers. Under such conditions, wife beating and marital rape could barely be conceived of as crimes.

Our situation is profoundly different. Women are flooding into public space. Exploitation, new forms of sexual anomy, backlash, phobic resistance from men, new impediments to women's autonomy are all inevitable; but we must not misinterpret these as defeats, nor lose heart about our long-term ability to change the state, nurture our own institutions and protect ourselves without restricting ourselves.

The antipornography movement has attracted women from many sectors of women's liberation. But this unity has a high price, for it requires that we oversimplify, that we hypothesize a monolithic enemy, a timeless, universal, male sexual brutality. When we create a "them," we perform a sort of ritual of purification: There are no differences among men or women—of power, class, race. All are collapsed into a false unity, the brotherhood of the oppressors, the sisterhood of the victims.

In this sisterhood, we can seem far closer than we are likely to feel when we discuss those more basic and problematic sources of sexual mores: ethnicity, church, school and family. We are bound to disagree once we confront the sexual politics implicit in these complex social institutions, but from just
this sort of useful debate will come the substance of a nonracist feminist concept of sexual freedom. Sometimes, ironically, our drive toward a premature feminist unity through female outrage has led to scapegoating inside the women's movement, as if we were already agreed about which sexual practices belong beyond the feminist pale. I find such internal attacks particularly terrifying now at a time when sexual minorities are increasingly harassed by the state. Given the sexual ignorance, fear and oppression in a sex-negative society, it is a false hope that feminist unity can rely on a premature agreement on sexual expression.

What are the feminist grounds of unity in a discussion of pornography, or of women's sexual freedom in general? Feminists on all sides of this debate share the desire to "take back the night"; to own our sexual selves; to express these selves in images of our own choosing. We share a feminist anger about women's sexual exploitation and a desire to leave the impress of this feeling—our recognition of profound injustices that reach to the core of identity—upon the consciousness of the world.

We also share the belief that sex is primarily a social, not biological, construction; hence social power relations have everything to do with who can do what to whom sexually. Since sex is social, we agree that its symbolic representation is important, that the imagery of sex is worth feminist analytical attention. We agree, too, that in sex, as in everything, women are sometimes right to fear: misogyny permeates our social life and men dominate women. But finally, and significantly, we disagree about the best route to liberation—or even to safety.

Present antipornography theory, rather than advancing feminist thinking about sexuality, continues sexist traditions of displacement or distortion of sexual questions. Instead of enlarging the definition of sexual pleasure to include a formerly invisible female subjectivity, antipornography thinking perpetuates an all too familiar intellectual legacy, one that defines male arousal as intrinsically threatening to female autonomy. Once again, women's experience fades into the background while men fill the foreground. Antipornography theory limits this focus further by collapsing a wide range of sexually explicit images into only one thing: violence against women.

But feminists have little to gain from this narrowing idea of what pornographic imagery contains. A definition of pornography that takes the problem of analysis seriously has to include not only violence, hatred and fear of women, but also a long list of other elements, which may help explain why we women ourselves have such a mixture of reactions to the genre. (I have heterosexual porn in mind here, but some of this description applies to other types of pornography; generally, porn is a much more varied genre than antiporn activists acknowledge.)

Pornography sometimes includes elements of play, as if the fear women feel toward men had evaporated and women were relaxed and willing at last. Such a fantasy—sexual revolution as fait accompli—is manipulative and insensitive in most of the guises we know, but it can also be wishful, eager and utopian.

Porn can depict thrilling (as opposed to threatening) danger. Though some of its manic quality comes from women-hating, some seems propelled by fear and joy about breaching the always uncertain boundaries of flesh and personality.

Hostility haunts the genre, but as part of a psychodrama in which men often imagine themselves women's victims. Mother is the ultimate spectre and women, too, have moments of glee when she is symbolically brought low.

Some pornography is defiant and thumbs a nose at death, at the limita-
tions of the body and nature, indeed at anything that balks the male (perhaps potentially the female?) will.

Porn offers men a private path to arousal, an arousal that may be all too easily routed by fear or shame.

Though pornography often centers emotionally on dramas of dominance and submission, anyone who has looked at the raging dependence or the imagined omnipotence of a one-year-old has reason to doubt that patriarchy is the only source of our species’ love/hate relationship to the emotions of power and powerlessness. Pornography is infantile then, but “infantile” is a word we use as a simple negative at the risk of patronizing some of our own sources of deep feeling. In many of the guises we know, such infantile feelings give rise to images of the brutal or the coldly murderous; in others, however, childishness can be more innocently regressive, potentially renewing. As Kate Ellis and others have argued, we can indulge in fantasies of childish omnipotence without having these define the entire field of our consciousness or intentions. Particular deep feelings may be neither valuable or liberating, but they demand understanding; they cannot be sanitized through mere will.

Ridden with authoritarian fantasies as it is, pornography also flouts authority, which no doubt in part explains its appeal to young boys. Certainly while porn remains one of their few sources of sexual information we should not marvel at the importance of the genre. But porn as we know it is, of course, a miserably skewed source of information. While it does offer taboo, explicit images—however distorted—of the bodies of women, the male body usually remains invisible. Since men control porn, they can continue to conceal themselves from inquisitive female eyes.

The same people who want sex education removed from schools now join feminists in the fight against porn. If this odd alliance prospers, we will hear the crash of successive doors closing in the faces of curious but isolated children. In the present political context, pieties about protecting children are passive and reactive; we are not protecting them so much as abandoning them to silence. Pornography as we know it requires a social context of ignorance and shame that present feminist campaigns against it do nothing to alter.

Finally, antipornography theory’s central complaint about pornography is that it is objectifying and fragmenting. The genre makes women into things for male pleasure and takes only that part of the woman that pleases without threat. Once again, the danger of objectification and fragmentation depend on context. Not even in my most utopian dreams can I imagine a state in which one recognizes all others as fully as one recognizes oneself (if one can even claim to recognize oneself, roundly, fully, without fragmentation). The real issue is a political one. Antipornography activists are right to see oppressive male power in the gaze of men at women: Women cannot gaze back with a similar, defining authority. But, while we all want the transformed sexuality that will be ours when we are neither dependent nor afraid, the antipornography campaign introduces misleading goals into our struggle when it intimates that in a feminist world we will never objectify anyone, never take the part for the whole, never abandon ourselves to mindlessness or the intensities of feeling that link sex with childhood, death, the terrors and pleasures of the oceanic. Using people as extensions of one’s own hungry will is hardly an activity restrained within the boundaries of pornography, nor is there any proof that pornography is a cause rather than
a manifestation of far more pervasive imbalances of power and powerlessness.

Antipornography activists argue that pornography is everywhere, both the source of woman hatred and its ultimate expression. This is an effort to have it both ways: woman-hating is everywhere, but the source of that hatred is specific, localized in pornography, the hate literature that educates men to degrade women. The internal contradiction here is plain. If misogyny is everywhere, why target its sexual manifestation? Or if misogyny collects around the sexual, why is this so? Why assume that the cordonning off of particular sexual images is likely to lessen women’s oppression? This overemphasis placed on sex as cause is continuous with the very old idea that sex is an especially shameful, disturbing, guilt-provoking area of life. To accept rather than struggle against the idea that sex is dangerous and polluting is to fear ourselves as much as the men who rape and hurt. We need to be able to reject the sexism in porn without having to reject the realm of pornographic sexual fantasy as if that entire kingdom were without meaning or resonance for women.

Without history, without an analysis of complexity and difference, without a critical eye toward gender and its constant redefinitions, without some skepticism about how people ingest their culture, some recognition of the gap—in ideas and feelings—between the porn magazine and the man who reads it, we will only be purveying a false hope to those women whom we want to join us: that without porn, there will be far less male violence; that with less male violence, there will be far less male power.

In the antipornography campaign, the thing we have most to fear is winning, for further legal control of pornography would, first, leave the oppressive structures of this society perfectly intact, even strengthened, and, second, leave us disappointed, since crimes against women are not particularly linked to pornography and indeed have many other highly visible sources.

Women will be victimized while we lack power. But even now we are not completely powerless. In fact, we are in the midst of complex power negotiations with men all the time. One of the basic themes of porn is the taming of the beast, Woman, who if not bound, will grab; if not gagged, will speak. Pornography’s fantasy penis is meant to tame the little bitch as it rarely can in real life.

However silenced and objectified we may be in the prevailing culture, we are not only silenced, not only objectified. Porn cannot fully define the situation in which we find ourselves. It symbolizes some, but not all, of our experiences—with men, with sexuality, with culture. In the liberation struggles of the ’60s, American radicals insisted that everything is connected: what was happening in Vietnam was connected to what was happening in imperialist America. In the analysis and rhetoric of the antipornography movement, this tendency is carried to a distorting extreme. Instead of seeing connections among very different elements in our culture, some antipornography activists conflate things, see them all running together down a slippery slope. Pornography leads to rape, which leads to the rape of the land, which leads to international imperialism.

I’m not arguing that these things are not connected, only that by connecting them too quickly, too seamlessly, through the evocative power of metaphor, we fail to see the all-important differences. We must make distinctions of kind and of degree. For if it is in the places where things don’t fit together neatly that we can best insert our political will toward change.

If we leave this discussion in the realm of moral absolutes, of slippery slopes on the road to sin, we have chosen a rhetorical strategy that can arouse and enrage but that cannot lead us to a position beyond the old moral categories of female righteousness.

Ironically enough, the slippery slope model isolates sex from all other issues, since all other issues collapse into sex, are only sex. Once again, differences, varieties of power and powerlessness, get lost in a false unity. A frame is drawn around women’s sexual exploitation and we are told this is the whole picture, the essence, the core truth. Women’s sexual suffering becomes women’s sexuality itself.

We do particular injury to feminist work by conflating sex with violence. This is to cede precious territory to the political opponents of feminism. It may be the female legacy of shame and fear that makes us accept this equation so quickly. Is it in our interests—not to mention in the interest of truth—to say that because husbands often rape wives, all marriage is rape? Or to say that women who reject this equation have been brainwashed by patriarchy? This is to deny women any agency at all in the long history of heterosexuality.

It is hard to imagine good organizing that can emerge from this insulting presumption. In her book Right Wing Women, antipornography theorist Andrea Dworkin argues that there are but two models for women’s roles in society: the farm model and the prostitution model. Women are either fields to be plowed, cows to be milked; or they are meat to be bought. This is a pornographic reductionism of the role of women in history.

The antipornography world view purports to solve several problems at once: it explains movement failure; it downplays what is unnerving in our successes; it reenergizes honorably weary activists; it reestablishes unity at a time when
differences among women are increasingly visible and theoretically important. But, built on weak foundations, these political gains will not endure. When maleness is defined as a timeless quality, it becomes harder rather than easier to imagine how it can ever change. The politics of rage tapers off into a politics of despair—or of complacency—and gender, which at moments has seemed very fluid and variable, suddenly seems solid and reliable again. If, as Mary Daly generalized in Gym/Ecology, footbinding in China and suttee in India and child molestation in Manitoba are all identical, seamless, essentially male acts, where is the break in this absolute tradition, the dynamic moment when female will can prevail?

Since one of the faults of antipornography theory is its misplaced concreteness, I can’t be correspondingly specific about how I would go about working to alter the often limited, rapacious or dreary sexual culture in which women—and also men—now live. There are a lot of questions to answer: Does a disproportionate amount of misogynistic feeling cluster around sex? Why? How deep does sexual phobia go? Is sex in fact an area of experience that will need to be seen as separate, with its own inner dynamic, even perhaps its own dialectic? If we reject the strategy of repression and banning, how do we raise self-consciousness and political consciousness about the aspects of porn that express sexual distress, derangement, hostility? (It does seem obvious to me that banning is a step in the opposite direction, away from learning, from unmasking, and toward a suppression that ignores meaning.) What is the actual content of porn and how is porn related to the broader questions of arousal? In other words, what makes something sexy, and what part does power play in the sexualization of a person or situation? Is it a feminist belief that without gender inequality all issues of power will wither away, or do we have a model for the future that will handle inequalities differently? Are there kinds of arousal we know and experience that are entirely absent in porn? How expressive is it of our full sexual range? How representative? How conventional and subject to its own aesthetic laws?

We must work to answer these questions, but we know a lot already. We know that women must have the right to abortion, to express freely our sexual preferences; that we must have the control of the structure and the economics of health care, day care, and our work lives in general. All these levels of private and social experience determine the degree of our sexual autonomy. The New Right is sure it knows what women’s sexuality is all about. We must reject such false certainties—in both the feminist and New Right camps—while we set about building the nonrepressive sexual culture we hope for, one in which women’s sexual expressiveness—and men’s too—can flourish. In her essay “Why I’m Against S/M Liberation” (in Against Sadomasochism), Ti Grace Atkinson says, “I do not know any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex.” While women are forced to make such a choice we cannot consider ourselves free.

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