

**Social Text 37 Winter 1993****Edited by Anne McClintock**

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**Genders 19 November 1994****Sexual Artifice: Persons, Images, Politics****Edited by Ann Kibbey, Kayann Short and Abouali Farmanfarmaian**

New York University Press

ISBN 0 8147 4651 9, \$17.50 Pbk, ISBN 0 8147 4650 0, \$50.00 Hbk

*Social Text* combines academic essays on the theme of the sex trade and sexuality with statements by sex workers and clients. While the political strategy of giving sex workers a space to speak for themselves – many complain of being spoken for while their own voices are silenced – is important, I did at first wonder how useful these accounts were. I am sure I am not alone in being fascinated to know what men will pay for and who does what in bed, but to some extent I feel ‘so what?’ Once you know that someone wants to be humiliated or to perform domestic labour with a cucumber up their bum, what difference does it make? Well, the main difference is that it challenges two prevalent myths that obscure debate and hinder policy about the sex trade. Firstly, prostitutes and other sex workers emerge as self-directing, articulate agents rather than as speechless victims; secondly, stereotypes about their clients and the services they offer are upturned – contrary to popular belief, the commercial SM scene is full of men who want to be dominated and the apparently small number of women who want a male dominator have problems finding one. In the first instance, the articles by sex workers indicate that many see their profession as a choice. While national and international organizations of prostitutes acknowledge the vagaries of the situation (and certainly never minimize the amount of coercion and violence in some regions or countries) women generally want prostitution to be seen as a job, with better pay and working conditions than other available employment. Most importantly, especially for anyone who wants to depict prostitutes as ‘pure’ in order to save them, it is clear that, like workers in any other field of employment, prostitutes are able to derive a sense of self-worth from a job well done and are proud of their skill and professional standing. The domina’s emphasis on the skill involved in managing a bondage and discipline scene is not the false consciousness of a duped female, but the self-assessment of a worker practised in her field.

Sadomasochism and other forms of fetishism do occur often in this collection. Anne McClintock surveys a variety of such practices in the commercial sector (domestic 'slavery', bondage, babyism) and offers some useful speculations on what motivates their practitioners. She is helpfully clear on the differences between commercial consensual SM and common or garden sadism: SM is sex as consensual theatre involving 'social risk' which transforms pain into pleasure, dirt into value; sadism is non-consensual and has no sense of reversing social values (a man who beats his wife does not put on a rubber dress to do it). This piece, from which I learned much, is one of the few writings on SM that deals with the confused and often fragile boundary between consensual and non-consensual sexualized violence and that challenges the libertinism of the SM lobby. Troublingly, but intriguingly, this collection leaves me wondering whether the reason why only masochistic men are paying for services is because sadistic men can get/take what they want for free?

The new book-style version of *Genders* is concerned more broadly with the construction and representation of sexuality. Most of the articles in this issue are excellent and many are delightfully interdisciplinary. Rajeswari Mohan's impressive analysis of Indian cinema begins with the problem of authenticity raised by feminists speaking for/as/about Third World women and proceeds, via a discussion of the homogenization of women within contemporary Indian politics, to discuss how the female gaze in the films of K. Balanchander resituates Western feminist film theory. The legacy of colonialism is further demonstrated by Heather Zwicker's discussion of the representation of gender in Northern Ireland. Her reading of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* shows how the film's ostensible revelation (that Dil has male genitalia) is less a problem of sex than of nation: 'if the individual human body [and its gendered identity] is almost infinitely permeable, how can the national body [and hence national identity] remain immutable?'. Similar, but less convincing, is Cynthia Weber's geopolitical analysis of male hysteria and the American invasion of Panama. Although I am quite taken with the picturing of Bush and Noriega as male hysterics, frantically overacting the phallic power they feel themselves to have lost, her tendency to indulge in word play results in specious observations – 'Furthermore, the name "Bush" announces the location of female genitalia' – that do not help her argument. Other articles, including those by Ian Barnard, Talia Schaffer, Leah Hackleman and Margaret A. Eisenhart and Nancy R. Lawrence demonstrate textual readings that address the role of fantasy in textual production and consumption and locate both in relation to material practice. Even when I am not entirely convinced by their conclusions, as in Barnard's analysis of Califia's *Macho Sluts*, I am inspired by the precision and thoughtfulness of their work. Eisenhart and

Lawrence, who address Anita Hill's perplexing loss of credibility during the Clarence Thomas hearing, are well worth a read and I was entranced by Schaffer's analysis of the photographs in *Orlando*. Her discussion of their relationship to the narrative (never straightforwardly illustrative, often oppositional) and the intimate family and friendship dynamics involved in their production, extends Butler's theory of performativity to challenge the potential normatization of masculinity: while the novel presents masculinity as a more 'natural', easily acquired state than femininity, the photographs reveal masculinity also to be a masquerade.

Reina Lewis

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## The Lesbian Postmodern

Edited by Laura Doan

Columbia University Press: New York, 1994

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This collection of essays is curiously characterized by its contributors' musings about the point of it all. 'Why *lesbian postmodern*?' wonders Dana A. Heller (p. 173); 'when I was invited to submit an essay to this collection, my response was to disagree with the collection's premise', writes Judith Roof (p. 47). It is easy at first to endow the volume with a kind of fashionable postmodern superfluity. Why does everything have to be somehow brought into relation with postmodernism? And why a *lesbian*, rather than a gay, postmodernism? But it is the strength of this book to make you want to argue and to wonder why. A number of categories that have been vaguely dissolving around us are here vigorously and precisely contested: sexual essentialism, the commodification of lesbianism, the lesbian body, the relation between lesbianism and feminism. One of the conclusions of the book is that 'lesbian' as a category is irrelevant in a postmodern culture anyway: 'the end of lesbianism as we know it' (p. 99), and inevitably the dreaded p-word, 'postlesbian' (after postfeminism it was only a matter of time before her sister too was laid to rest).

Of course statements and arguments of this kind will irritate many. There is lived experience to reckon with, a category that even postmodernism has not quite managed to do away with. The everyday realities of 'living as a lesbian', for many women (and, according to this book, some who are not 'women'), repeatedly resist postmodernization in ways that make a lot of books, not only this one, feel faintly silly. This is of course part of a much wider discursive collision between theoretical writing and other, more