

Ten Lies About Sadomasochism

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1. Pain is pleasure; humiliation is enjoyable; bondage is liberation.
2. Sadomasochism is love and trust, not domination and annihilation.
3. Sadomasochism is not racist and anti Semitic even though we “act” like slave owners and enslaved Africans, Nazis and persecuted Jews.
4. Sadomasochism is consensual; no one gets hurt if they don’t want to get hurt. No one has died from sadomasochistic “scenes.”
5. Sadomasochism is only about sex. It doesn’t extend into the rest of the relationship.
6. Sadomasochistic pornography has no relationship to the sadomasochistic society we live in. “If it feels good, go with it.” “We create our own sexuality.”
7. Lesbians “into sadomasochism” are feminists, devoted to women, and a women-only lesbian community. Lesbian pornography is “by women, for women.”
8. Since lesbians are superior to men, we can “play” with sadomasochism in a liberating way that heterosexuals can not.
9. Reenacting abuse heals abuse. Sadomasochism heals emotional wounds from childhood sexual assault.
10. Sadomasochism is political dissent. It is progressive and even “transgressive” in that it breaks the rules of the dominant sexual ideology.

Although formulated by its current advocates as an issue of sexual liberation, minority rights, or even healing, I consider lesbian sadomasochism to be primarily an issue of feminist ethics. I believe that lesbians who embrace sadomasochism either theoretically or in practice, are supporting the lifeblood of patriarchy. “The symbols, language and style of lesbian sadomasochist chic are the symbols, language and style of male supremacy: violation, ruthlessness, intimidation, humiliation, force, mockery, consumerism.” (De Clarke, 1993) Choosing sadomasochism, given our oppression, is an act of profound betrayal. The ideas I’m writing about are not new (please see the references at the end of this article), but hopefully they will be a useful summary which can be used by feminists to see that much of what sadomasochists claim is simply not true.

Lie #1: Pain is pleasure; humiliation is enjoyable, bondage is liberation.

This is the big lie. Part of the reason that we are vulnerable to this lie is that many of us were raised with religious notions that punishment is love and that suffering is redemption. A young acquaintance who rowed on a crew team showed me a t-shirt which said: “What does not kill me will make me stronger.” As women we are taught that love is selfless devotion regardless of the pain suffered. We believe that love is pain because we keep getting hurt. Women are taught not to believe our senses or intuition. We are taught to believe that pain, suffering, and humiliation are challenges which we should look forward to because they teach us the important things in life. After that, what can’t they do to us, what can’t they get us acclimated to? We’ve learned to “consent” to subordination, even become culturally enthralled by it. If chains and a collar represent

rebellion and “being in control,” then Madonna is our “rebel” Barbie and Ted Bundy her Ken. (from Morgan, 1993)

Lie #2: Sadomasochism is love and trust, not domination and annihilation.

Sadomasochism has to do with annihilation. Contrary to the popular legend that sadomasochism expands one’s sexuality, I believe that it restricts and ultimately destroys one’s sexual being. Subordination, humiliation, and torture are all means of deliberately destroying the self. I recently read an article about the way Texas patriarch Koresh entwined “sex, violence, love and fear” in order to control cult members. These techniques are not new; people have long harmed others in the name of love, religion, or politics. Today’s lesbian sadomasochism is all dressed up in a new coat: the coat of “lifestyle choice,” “oppressed minority,” “sexual liberation.” Although the violence turns my stomach, I appreciate Jan Brown’s candor which cuts through the liberal rhetoric about the delights of sadomasochism, and gets to the core of the matter. In an article from Outlook, 1990, entitled, “Sex, Lies and Penetration, a Butch Finally ‘Fesses Up,” Brown writes: “Sex that is gentle, passive, egalitarian, does not move us. [Remember when we] emphasized the simple difference between fantasy and reality? Well, we lied. The power is not in the ability to control the violent image. It is in the lust to be overpowered, forced, hurt, used, objectified. We jerk off to the rapist, Hell’s Angel, daddy, the Nazi, cop. We dream of someone’s blood on our hands, of laughing at cries for mercy. Sometimes, we want to give up to the strangler’s hands. We want to have the freedom to ignore ‘no’ or have our own ‘no’ ignored.”

Lie #3: Sadomasochism is not racist and anti Semitic even though we “act” like slave owners and enslaved Africans, Nazis and persecuted Jews.

My silence about lesbian sadomasochism ended when I saw two anti Semitic sadomasochists at a women’s festival. One woman who wore a yarmulke was being walked like a dog with a chain around her neck by a woman in Nazi “leathers.” When I protested, the woman in leather politely listened and agreed to remove her own Nazi insignia and her captive’s yarmulke. I had the impression that she had never even considered the political implications, that is, the anti Semitism, of the “scene” she was enacting. To identify as a Nazi (her uniform) in any context, is to identify not only as a sexually dominating sadist, but also as one who hates Jews, one who wants Jews to suffer and to be annihilated. To masquerade as a Jew, (wearing a yarmulke), chained with a leash, is not only to identify as a sexually submissive masochist. It also embraces the humiliation and torture of Jews under Nazi anti Semitism: the Jew is the one who gets hurt, and here, see how much she likes it. Some liberal gay newspapers “censor” ads for the KKK, but still publish personal ads for readers looking for Black, or Latino or Asian sexual slaves. Racism seems to be more acceptable to them if it is eroticized. Somehow, if eroticized, the humiliation, sadism and torture of racism and anti Semitism become acceptable. Torture always has a sexual component to it. If a radical feminist were to challenge the same newspaper on the issue of sadomasochism, we’d be called “censors.” The whole issue of censorship is used to intimidate us and silence critical dialogue about sadomasochism.

Lie #4: Sadomasochism is consensual; no one gets hurt if they don't want to get hurt. No one has died from sadomasochistic "scenes."

"It is the focus on the bottom's desire that distinguishes sadomasochism from assault." (Califia, 1992) Is it ever OK to consent to one's own humiliation and victimization? I do not think so. Just because we "consent" to domination or abuse, does not mean it is not oppressive. "Has a woman who has run away from sexual assault by her father and ended up turning tricks for a living consented? Has a woman who learned sexual lessons from incest consented to a sexuality in which she can get no pleasure unless she has no power?" (Cole, 1989) Has a ritual abuse survivor, having been through her own Inquisition in childhood, consented when she reenacts sexual torture in adulthood which trigger her memories as an adult? The ability of words to hurt should not be underestimated. The threat of rape is backed up by words, weapons which define us as objects and which tell us we deserve whatever we get. Women's self-hate arises as much from verbal assault as from physical assault. Some form of verbal abuse is involved in most sadomasochist scenes. When these vicious words are delivered in the context of sexual arousal, they have a powerful impact. Sexually sadistic words contribute to women's self-hatred. Sadists pay lip service to consent, but ignore the power systems which create inequality and make meaningful consent impossible. In this culture we have no experience of equal power relationships. "It is not the acknowledgement of the hold sadomasochism still has over our psyches that conflicts with feminism, what we have a problem with is the unwillingness to reflect on its political meaning" (Fritz, 1983) Extreme violence sometimes occurs during sadomasochistic "play." I have been informed of many instances where "safe" words were ignored during a sadomasochistic "scene." I also know that women have died during sadomasochistic activities and that these deaths are only whispered about - they are not openly acknowledged.

Lie #5: Sadomasochism is only about sex. It doesn't extend into the rest of the relationship.

Sadomasochism has everything to do with sexism, racism and class in the real world. It is very much related to internalized self-hatred. One Samoia member wrote: "To be a good bottom [masochist], to please my mistress, is a very powerful feeling. Those lessons I have learned in my bed, I can take into other aspects of my life and see how that makes me powerful...to enjoy every moment of what I'm doing." (Linden et al., 1982) I see lesbians embracing the dominant/submissive hierarchy that feminists have spent their lives trying to eliminate in heterosexual relationships. Just the way racism and anti-Semitism are eroticized in sadomasochism, so the domination, the sexism itself, is eroticized in sadomasochistic relationships. The sadistic sexual relationship sets the tone for the rest of the relationship. Submitting and giving in during a disagreement, for example becomes a sexualized act. And real physical violence can and does occur as a natural extension of the inequality of the sexual relationship. Hitting someone is usually a sadistic act. Assault and rape do occur in lesbian relationships - and they are normalized by the patterns laid down sexually. The dominating, coercive mockery of the sadist is sometimes forced on our communities. In 1988, I posted a notice for a workshop called

“The effects of sadistic/violent sexual practices on nonparticipants: a support group; closed to sadomasochist participants and advocates.” As a small group of us sat on the ground and talked, six or seven women with whips came and stood, arms folded, behind us. They said nothing; the intent to intimidate was clear. Another example of the pervasive effect of sadomasochism on a community occurred in 1990, when the organizers of a large women’s festival wrote about how sadomasochistic activity of some women infringes on other women’s rights “to move freely and safely without fear or horror.”

Lie #6: Sadomasochistic pornography has no relationship to the sadomasochistic society we live in. “If it feels good, go with it.” “We create our own sexuality.”

We internalize sadomasochistic fantasies because it is the sexuality which has been shoved down our throats from the day we were born. As women we’re raised to be “bottoms:” lesbian “bottoms” tend to outnumber “tops” [sadists] by 10 to 1. “What feels good” is largely constructed by social oppression: racism, sexism, classism. We are not born with an innate sexuality where no elements of it are learned or manipulated. Yet many liberal, pro-pornography advocates deny any relationship between sadomasochism and the violence in the rest of our culture. It is no longer possible to discount the causal effect of pornography on violence against women. Diana Russell has recently published a summary of research about the ways in which pornography has been shown to cause women harm. (Russell, 1993) I believe that her argument can be applied to lesbian pornography in exactly the same way: pornography, whether straight or lesbian, promotes inequality and eroticizes that unequal relationship. Actually, like our eating habits, sexuality is utterly conditionable. When we rehearse sadistic abuse in fantasy, pornography, and sexual games, we legitimize its authority in our own minds, and may end up helping other authorities in our lives keep us in bondage in other ways. Sadomasochism is everywhere in this culture - just take a good look at your workplace, your family, your church..

Lie #7: Lesbians “into sadomasochism” are feminists, devoted to women and a women-only lesbian community. Lesbian pornography is “by women and for women.”

Pat Califia has said that she’d rather be stuck on a desert island with a masochistic boy than with a vanilla lesbian. Bottoms are seen as “generic, interchangeable, and replaceable.” (Califia, 1992) Califia is committed to the role of sadist, not to any particular sexual preference. “Sex defined as a commodity [sadomasochism or prostitution] leads to a marketplace where the gender of whore and client is irrelevant compared to kind and cost of services provided.” (Clarke, 1993) While lesbians who are “into sadomasochism” define themselves as lesbian, their sadomasochistic practices are bisexual. I have no political criticism of bisexuality - what I am criticizing is sadomasochist posturing as devoted lesbian members of the women’s community. Pseudolesbian pornography, that is, pictures of women who are imitating lesbians’ sexual behavior, has been a favored element in straight male pornography since it was first

published. It sells. Despite the fact that it is often advertised as being owned and distributed by and for women, “lesbian” pornography sells briskly to straight men.

Lie #8: Since lesbians are superior to men, we can “play” with sadomasochism in a liberating way that heterosexuals can not.

I do not think that women are biologically superior to men. In fact, I see that notion as dangerous and reactionary. “Anatomy is destiny” is not exactly a feminist idea. Sadistic and masochistic attitudes and behaviors among lesbians, in fact, are a good example of how we internalize abusive ideas just like everyone else does. We’re seduced by male domination - because we see that that is where power lies. Yet we delude ourselves if we think it is possible to “play” the rapist without becoming the rapist.

Lie #9: Reenacting abuse heals abuse. Sadomasochism heals emotional wounds from childhood sexual assault.

This lie really disturbs me. A greater percentage of women “into sadomasochism” have histories of childhood sexual assault, than those women who do not participate in sadomasochism. However, sadomasochism obscures the real pain and abuse of women. How can you tell the difference between “real” and “pretend” when someone has a flashback and becomes a child again in the middle of “consensual” sexual torture? Some feel an intense, even compulsive drive toward sexual annihilation that is expressed in sadomasochistic activity which mirrors the abuse suffered as a child. The notion that acting out abuse helps to heal and eliminate abuse arises from the catharsis theory: do it once, just get it out of your system, then you will get over it. There is no evidence that catharsis works as a solution to social or psychological conflict, yet this theory is used to rationalize the dissemination of pornography. Pornography does not seem to have served as a pressure-cooker-release for men, thus freeing women from rape. On the contrary, pornography seems to have functioned as pro-rape propaganda. Sadomasochistic catharsis does not seem to heal sexual abuse either: one woman wrote, “after seventeen years of [childhood sexual assault], the lesbians I met just wanted to do more of the same. I have nightmares and damage from both.” (Anonymous, 1990) Sadomasochism is a repetition, not a healing, of childhood sexual assault. Some have suggested that sadomasochism can actually be physiologically addictive. I have heard women describe themselves as being “in recovery from sadomasochism,” the same way they speak of alcohol addiction. Perhaps the physical addiction to certain kinds of trauma begins with complex physical reactions to prolonged abuse in childhood which is then rekindled in adult sadomasochistic relationships.

Lie #10. Sadomasochism is political dissent. It is progressive and even “transgressive” in that it breaks the rules of the dominant sexual ideology.

The posturing of sadists and masochists as “transgressive” can be confusing to those not familiar with feminist theory. By definition, the ultimate goal of feminism is to end sadomasochism. Our system is sadomasochistic to the core, how is celebrating it any kind of true rebellion? (Fritz, 1983). The political values of sadism are blatantly antifeminist,

totalitarian and right-wing. Sadomasochism is business as usual; power relations as usual; race, gender and class as usual. Sadomasochism is one ritual version of dominance and submission. Sadomasochism is not a creative deviation from normal heterosexual behavior. It is the defining quality of the power relationship between women and men. Sadism is the logical extension of behavior that arises out of male power (Wagner, 1982). We live in a misogynist world, and women have so little political power, that it's easier to fantasize about absolute personal power than to politically organize for change. (Clarke, 1993). Several young lesbians recently said to me that their fantasies about sadomasochism were their "salvation" in a world where they see no possibility of attaining real power. Sadomasochist dykes play-act power and prestige in a world that crushes any attempt to organize for real power. The play-acting helps us to forget how much we are hated and hurt. And forgetting that is the real danger.

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