Sex Wars, Revisited
Laura Guy

“For years we as lesbian-feminists have been fighting male pornography,” a reader named Donna from Washington D.C. wrote. “It shocks and abhors me to find that women have stooped to the same methods.” To scan the letters pages of the San Francisco-based magazine On Our Backs, published from 1984-2005, is to find lesbian erotica thrown into relief against the backdrop of the feminist sex wars. Antagonisms that characterised the movement, in the 1980s, play out in an epistolary exchange, and through the rancour, a contrasting story emerges. “How different–bold–and wonderful to see (for my first time) women enjoying women,” another reader commented. “It makes me remember that I’m not alone in my thoughts, although fairly secluded in South Carolina’ says another. One reader gets right to the point: “...a splendid aid to masturbation! Thanks!” Nestled among these letters are whetted appetites and desires unmet, a request for clarification on attraction between butches, a note about racial integration in the San Francisco leather scene, even a complaint about proofreading errors. A field of lesbian desire appears, one that was contested, shared, and shaped by contributors and readers alike.

The publication emerged at a juncture in feminist history known as the “sex wars,” a time of high-octane tensions between “pro-sex” and “anti-pornography” feminists. The two terms obscure the complexity of these debates yet gesture toward a stark ideological rift. To summarize, pro-sex feminists sought new languages for female desire. Feminist anti-pornography groups, such as Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media and Women Against Pornography campaigned for increased legal sanctions on the production and circulation of pornographic material. Photography figured predominantly in this debate, both often a catalyst for antagonism and a means by which feminist affinities might be established and fantasies explored. In the context of these fraught and painful divisions, On Our Backs contributed to a burgeoning media
through which images of lesbian sexuality were constructed and disseminated, both lusted after and spurned.

The magazine was an early platform for lesbian sex photography. Along with the Boston-based *Bad Attitude*, it carved out a space for others to emerge (*Outrageous Women*, *Wicked Women*, *Quim*, and *Lezzie Smut*, to name a few international examples that followed). In its first decade, the magazine was instrumental in shaping a culture organised around lesbian desire. The first editorial, written by Debi Sundahl and Myrna Elana, co-founding editor and publisher respectively, introduces *On Our Backs* as an “offering” to the community with the aim of “sexual freedom, respect and empowerment for lesbians.” There were many who worked to realise this goal. Susie Bright, then the manager of Good Vibrations, a San Francisco shop selling sex toys for women, oversaw six years as editor-in-chief. Starting out as something of a sexual agony aunt, her advice column became a trademark of the magazine. Nan Kinney, another founding editor, went to develop Fatale Media, a producer of lesbian erotica videos that by the end of the 1980s was the largest of its kind. Alongside writing, poetry, and graphic art, photography was key to realizing the ambitions of the magazine and *On Our Backs* was shaped around a culture of image makers. Its smart black-and-white aesthetic was defined by photographers such as Honey Lee Cottrell, Tee Corinne, Morgan Grenwald, Jill Posener, Leon Mostovoy, and Katie Niles. Photography stories, reportage, constructed scenes, and advertising images mixed with informative articles, erotic fiction, and, importantly, personals. Later, people like Lulu Belliveau and Phyllis Christopher would be instrumental in developing an ever more stylish visual language that continued to challenge the paucity of available images of lesbians in mainstream culture.

There are perhaps two intertwined genealogies here. One is within histories of feminism, the other within those of homosexual culture. As often happens in politics, the sex wars played out as a dispute not only between opposing factions but also different generations. This division caricatured second-wave lesbian feminism as desexualising lesbian identity in favour of a political definition (“Any woman can be a lesbian,” sang lesbian separatist folk musician Alix Dobkin in
1974). Riffing on the politics of the 1970s, if not antagonistically, then at least with irreverence, *On Our Backs* appropriated their title from *off our backs*, a well-known feminist newspaper with roots in the Women’s Liberation Movement. A series of images that Christopher produced for *On Our Backs* in 1992 announced a fetish for flannel. Christopher admits – one suspects tongue firmly in cheek - to having suppressed her desire for the unfashionable check until seeing a documentary about Olivia Records, a record label synonymous with 1970s lesbian feminism. Getting off on history indicates a less complete break with the past than the idea of feminist waves first implies.

*On Our Backs* also looked back to public sex cultures that emerged in the wake of gay liberation. Many photographers whose work appeared in the magazine subverted the visual language of the male dominated s/m community. Grenwald’s fetish pictures, including a piece of lace reminiscent of a handkerchief or panties folded into a back pocket, offer a wry counterpoint to Hal Fischer’s record of homosexual dress codes collected in his book *Gay Semiotics* (1977). Christopher acknowledges the formal influence of Robert Mapplethorpe on her approach to visualising lesbian sex and desire. However exciting it might be to consider this subversion of gay male culture, references to canonical figures like Mapplethorpe should not obscure the radical project pursued by Christopher, Grenwald and their colleagues. As the AIDS crisis took hold in the United States and elsewhere, the imperative to create publicly visible representations of queer sex became ever more vital. In the context of political disempowerment and medical crisis, lesbian sex photography would take on increasing political charge, as the magazine provided an essential platform for lesbian creativity during a regime of state censorship enacted during the period of the culture wars in the U.S. Circulating in unmarked envelopes, *On Our Backs* networked lesbians internationally. An exchange took place between photographers in the U.S. and UK, where figures like Del LaGrace Volcano, Tessa Boffin, and Jean Fraser foregrounded lesbian identity within the theories of representation emerging out of schools, like the Polytechnic of Central London. If this was photography in the service of pleasure, it was also photography in the service of history. To
engage in documenting lesbian sex in the 1980s was to advance the historically necessary claims of feminism and gay liberation into the public sphere. For example, Leon Mostovoy’s images of lesbian sex workers at San Francisco’s Market Street Cinema might be viewed as part of a broader reworking of documentary practice in the 1980s, tied to the emergent debates around the politics of representation. Yet many lesbian practitioners regarded documentary with suspicion. Instead, pornography, which is peculiarly structured by both arch realism and pure fantasy, provided a space where the pathologization of lesbian sexuality could be resisted. For its ubiquity, obscenity, perhaps even for the material conditions of its production, pornography is a particularly degraded kind of image making in histories of photography, removed from the value systems of the academy as well as those of the art world.

A collective project like a magazine is bound to be fraught with internal struggles, and from the outset On Our Backs lived with a degree of financial precarity that would lead to both a hiatus and change in management in the mid-1990s. The difficulty of running the publication was compounded by the mounting restrictions on queer spaces as moral hysteria surrounding the AIDS crisis intersected with pernicious gentrification in San Francisco, which had an homogenising effect on the city. Revisiting this era through the pages of the magazine, allows a different set of possibilities relating to queer identity to emerge. On Our Backs is but one chapter in a rich history that also includes the work of Cathy Cade, Ruth Mountingrove, Tee Corinne, and Del LaGrace Volcano, whose vital contribution to queer photography began in the lesbian bars of San Francisco in the early 1980s. Trans or intersex-identified photographers like Volcano and Mostovoy started in the dyke scene alongside writers like Patrick Califia, known for his ground-breaking writing on BDSM subcultures and trans politics. Held within lesbian sex cultures of the 1980s are the kernels of the on-going struggles for recognition, of trans folk, sex workers, and fat activists, that continue to unsettle feminism today. At times it seems the magazine presents us is a lesbian feminist history of queer photography, at others a queer history of lesbian feminist photography. Perhaps instead, the diverse record of lesbian desire produced through the photographs in On Our Backs shows us
that the two are yoked together, far harder to separate than existing histories might have us believe.

*On Our Backs* is but one instance in a rich history that binds lesbian feminism to photography. Such a history would have to include the work of Cathy Cade, Ruth Mountingrove, Tee Corinne and Del LaGrace Volcano, whose vital contribution to queer photography began in the dyke bars of San Francisco in the early 1980s.

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