

Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife

Lesbian marriage: For better or for worse?



Rose West Part II
Misogyny and heritage tourism
Questioning the pink triangle
Having a go at *Brookside*
From *A Question of Silence* to
Antonia's Line

No. 34
£4.50

Trouble & Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Trouble & Strife is produced by Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Marian Foley, Stevi Jackson, Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon.

Front cover illustration: Grizelda Grizlingham

Thanks to: Caroline Forbes

Printed by Sandypress Manchester (0161) 273-7535.

Distributed by Central Books (0181) 986-4854.

Please note our address:

Trouble & Strife, PO Box 8, Diss, Norfolk IP22 3XG.

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& Strife**

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Letters

Support Manchester councillors' stand against table dancing

Dear T&S,

Earlier this year, following pressure from women councillors and women's groups, Manchester City Council introduced an amendment to the rules around entertainment licences in the city, which outlawed stripping, table dancing, lap dancing and any similar 'act'. However, club owners can still appeal for a waiver, which would allow them to continue with this type of 'entertainment'. So far, table dancing licences have been refused to two club owners. The second of these was one Zenon Rybicki, owner of the 'Fantasy Bar', in the centre of the city. His request for a waiver was refused on the 1st of October. Following this, the *Manchester Evening News* reported that 'women's campaigners were cheering a victory' and we were, but our joy was short-lived.

Very quickly the story was picked up by the *Sunday Sport*. On October 6th they printed the names and phone numbers of three women councillors and one council officer who had campaigned against the licence application of the Fantasy Bar. They termed the women 'Mrs Hitlers' and claim that the bar is well-run, that the dancers are well-paid and that none of these women had been to the bar, so they didn't know what they were talking about. And they went on, and on, and on in the same vein. They urged their readers to 'call and tell 'em what you think'. Since then the women's phone numbers have been printed at least three more times, and the stream of articles continues.

The women concerned have received enormous numbers of distressing and abusive phone calls, and whilst the *Sport* printed their work numbers only, some of the women have been hassled at home, since they are local councillors, so their phone numbers are readily available. A report on the issue in the *Observer* on 13th October, quotes the editor of the *Sport* as saying 'Good. I'm glad they have [been barraged with calls]. I'm not glad they've had abusive calls. We can't be accountable if there are lunatics in the country...'. Yet the *Sport* itself has called the women 'po-faced prudes'; 'the frumpy four' and 'busybodies' as well as 'little Hitlers' which all seem pretty abusive to me.

There are two more licence applications pending (one by Peter Stringfellow) and the

councillors concerned are determined to continue fighting against this degrading and objectifying 'entertainment'. Meanwhile the owner of the Fantasy Bar is expected to appeal the Council's decision.

Another unattractive angle that both the *Manchester Evening News* and the *Sport* have used is to contrast the Council's tolerant attitude to Manchester's gay village, and gay Mardi Gras, and the banning of strip-tease. The *Sport* (6/10/96) say 'we've nothing against gays, but we are against anyone ramming their sexuality down others throats. The City's Canal Street festival [Mardi Gras] was an unbridled orgy advertising the homosexual way... rather... a bit of strip-tease behind closed doors than parades promoting buggery'. Sadly, but not surprisingly, the owner of at least one gay venue has been quoted as supporting table dancing.

The *Sport's* reference to 'ramming sexuality down others' throats' is particularly priceless when you actually look at the content of their paper. It is jammed full of adds for 'phone sex' and 'sex videos' and features an agony page with 'problems' apparently being responded to by a topless model as well as numerous other pictures of topless women. As Natasha Walters has argued (*Guardian* 16/10/96) the paper 'exploits violence against women' and should be classed as pornography, rather than a newspaper.

Perhaps it is time for a new Private Member's Bill, to try to get something done about the *Sport*? Reading it to put this letter together has been a singularly unpleasant experience, and it's now quite clear to me that this 'paper' makes the *Sun* look like a very intellectual affair!

Meanwhile, the Manchester councillors need our support, to counteract the deluge of opposition stirred up by the *Sport*. If you oppose table dancing, please write in support to Councillor Val Edwards, Councillor Kath Fry or Councillor Alison Firth c/o Members' Secretariat, Town Hall, Manchester.

STOP PRESS: 29th October... Peter Stringfellow has now asked for an adjournment in his licence application, apparently because of the number of complaints received. He says he's particularly concerned about the complaints from Manchester's Domestic Violence Helpline and Rape Crisis Centre, although he's keen to stress that he has 'nothing to do with rape.. [or] domestic violence'. Presumably, though,

Stringfellow's application will re-surface in the New Year, when the Fantasy Bar appeal has been heard. Meanwhile, we still need support for the campaign.

In sisterhood,
Kate Cook

Rose West: compliant victim?

Dear T&S,

Reading Debbie Cameron's article on Rose West (T&S 33), made me remember two pieces of information about the case that I'd read in the *Guardian* at the time:

1. When Rose West went to visit her parents shortly after moving with Fred West, she told her parents that she was frightened of Fred West and afraid that he'd kill her one day. Her parents' reaction to this was to say, 'Well, you've made your bed, now you've got to lie in it.'
2. Although there is evidence that Fred West murdered women before he met Rose, there is no evidence that Rose had murdered before she met Fred.

Both of these pieces of information led me to believe that Rose West's motivation for taking part in the murders was (initially, at least) a fear of Fred West. She was faced with choice of: 1) going along with what Fred wanted and live, or 2) not going along with what he wanted and ending up being murdered. She chose the first option. Perhaps after a while she learnt to enjoy it all — this would have pleased Fred even more. Maybe she even thought this was a way of showing her love for Fred.

All of which leads me to the conclusion that Rose West was an 'accomplice', or a 'compliant victim' as the FBI call it.

As Debbie Cameron's article reveals, most female sex murderers act in partnership with men rather than alone, which suggests that the main motivation for the murders are on the man's part rather than the woman's.

Although there is evidence that Rose West took part in sexual abuse, there is no evidence for the extent of her contribution to the actual murders. Of course she must, at the very least, have known about the murders.

I'm not trying to justify Rose West's part in the murders, or excuse her behaviour or suggest she doesn't have a will of her own. She must take responsibility for her actions.

All I'm saying is that Fred West should take more of the responsibility.

Yours sincerely,
Nannette Herbert

The points raised by Nannette Herbert are discussed in more detail in Debbie Cameron's second article on the West case, which appears on p 44 of this issue of T&S.

Norwich Women's Centre

Dear T&S,

Norwich Women's Centre (NWC) has closed.

NWC was one of the first Women's Centres to open in the UK. It existed from the early 1970s till July 1996.

I am trying to find any women who have been involved with NWC over the years, as I am creating a written and oral history of the Centre.

I am a former collective member/co-ordinator/secretary of the Centre. I have taken responsibility for the Centre's archives which are being temporarily cared for by Bradford Feminist Archive.

I need to interview women in the next few months. I am also looking for photographs, posters and anything relevant to the Centre.

I am also specifically looking for any of the women who started the Centre or who were involved during the 1970s-1980s.

When this work is complete it will all be archived with feminist archives throughout the UK, the Lesbian Archive in Scotland and locally.

If you've ever been involved with Norwich Women's Centre or can help in any way, please contact me.

Many thanks,
Ziggy (for NWC)

Black survivors' group

Dear T&S,

Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre are setting up a Black Survivor's Group for Asian, African-Caribbean and African women who have experienced child sexual abuse.

The group aims to provide a forum where women who have been sexually abused can make sense of their experiences, and gain support and strength from each other. It is hoped that the women will be able to build upon their own inner strengths, and make use of their creativity and skills to make active changes in their lives.

There is a general lack of appropriate services for Black women. This group will

Norwich Women's Centre
Archive Project

PO Box 468
Norwich
Norfolk
NR5 8ES

Phoneline Details:**Mon-Fri: 9.30-11.30 am****Mon, Wed, Thurs: 7-9pm****English: At all times****Gujarati: Wed 7-9pm****Patois: Mon 9.30-11.30 am****Thurs 7-9 pm****Fri 9.30-11.30 am****Punjabi: Mon 7-9 pm,****Tues 9.30-11.30 am****Wed 9.30-11.30 am****Thurs 9.30-11.30am****Telephone number:****(01203) 677229****24 hour answerphone**

provide a chance for Black women to come together, develop a sense of belonging and move forward with each other in a shared, 'safe' and understanding environment. The group is completely confidential. Both facilitators are Black women.

Women who are interested and would like further details can call our telephone helpline and speak with a counsellor. She can arrange a meeting with one of the group facilitators in which any questions about the group, particularly about the safety, confidentiality, suitability and usefulness can be answered. We would like to hear from women as soon as possible as the group will be starting very shortly.

Yours sincerely,
Dollar Abbott and Sylvia McCooty

New radical newsletter

Dear T&S,

I am writing to invite lesbian/feminists to support a new radical newsletter aimed solely at our community across the country.

To begin, we hope to feature political and campaign news, articles from grassroot radical lesbian feminists on issues particularly important to our community, and book reviews.

Should the newsletter prove beneficial, we envision it developing into a tool of true networking with sections on available and needed resources such as research, money, personal support, etc; service contacts we could support such as trades or buying from home-workers; and importantly, the truly lesbian/feminist resting space.

The working title of the newsletter is *The Essential Lesbian Feminist* (ELF) but we are open to new ideas and suggestions.

If you are a radical lesbian/feminist and would like to contribute, become involved in or receive ELF, please ring Joanie on (01442) 395184.

Joanie Marion

Anorexia: The debate continues

Dear T&S,

The article 'A Hunger for Control' in the Summer 1995 T&S contained a great deal of

thoughtful analysis, but it also contained some remarkable omissions and discontinuities.

The most obvious inconsistency is in the statement, 'the irony of anorexia is that... the conscious strategy of not eating comes to control and oppress its creator', which implies that the original intention is one created by the sufferer. But further discussion of this strategy, in a later list of anorexic definitions of 'safe' and 'dangerous' foods, finds that, 'The categories for the most part fall into line with what is currently considered nutritionally good/healthy/wholesome', an indication that the 'basic rules' of anorexia are socially imposed, not self-devised. At this point, a major omission becomes apparent: the word 'calorie'... The article also ignored the common anorexic practice of incessant physical exercise (maximum calorie burn).

Yours, etc.
W.X. Evans

Morag McSween replies:

Are the 'basic rules' of anorexia 'socially imposed' or 'self-devised'? In the book from which the article is excerpted, I try to explain anorexia as a particular response by some women to rules, limitations and constrictions placed on us all in a patriarchal and capitalist culture. So while each individual anorexic woman does devise her own specific set of rituals around food, eating and her body, all the rituals have in common the exclusion of what is symbolically dangerous, sinful or 'wrong'. And anorexic rituals, in turn, reflect wider social ideas about what and how women are permitted to desire.

I think it's a fair criticism to point out that I don't talk about exercise — this is an omission from the book too. However, I wouldn't give calories the central explanatory role that Ms Evans does — some of the women I spoke of focused on calories, others did not, and some of women's 'safe' foods were high calorie and high fat — cheese, for example. I continue to think that the underlying meaning of anorexia is the exclusion of foods that become metaphors for 'fat', the sign of the gratification of autonomous female appetite.

For Better or for Worse?

Lesbian and gay marriage is on the political agenda in many countries. In some European countries — for instance the Scandinavian nations and the Netherlands — it is already a reality, and this could have implications in future for citizens of other EU member states. In the USA, by contrast, controversy has raged over same-sex marriages which have been permitted in the state of Hawaii, but which other states do not wish to recognise: this is a constitutional issue as well as one of lesbian/gay rights, and its profile in public debates (including the 1996 presidential campaign) is correspondingly high. The marriage debate is less advanced in Britain, where no practical proposals are under consideration, but it recently had an airing in the press, and is under discussion in some gay rights and civil liberties organisations. All in all we are hearing a lot about same-sex marriage, and it seems inevitable we will hear more. How, though, should radical feminists respond?

The most fundamental argument advanced by supporters of the right of same-sex couples to marry is based on the notion that the current prohibition is a denial of human rights which discriminates on grounds of sexuality or gender. The right to marry and form family units is enshrined in the UN Declaration of human rights; the framers of this document presumably had in mind that slaves, for example, were denied that right, as in practice many migrants still are by inhumane and racist immigration policies (in this area the UK is among the worst offenders). But for lesbian feminists there is obviously a dilemma here. Feminists have long argued that marriage is a cornerstone of the historical and actual oppression of women; 'marriage resistance' has been part of feminist politics, certainly in the English-speaking countries, for more than a hundred years. Even if we made no use of it, some of us would be more horrified than delighted to have our right to marry endorsed by a 'benevolent' state.

In this article, which we reprint from a recent issue of the feminist publication Broadsheet, Jenny Rankine looks at the current debate on same-sex marriage in New Zealand, where the law in many areas to do with relationships is undergoing a review, and lesbian marriage itself has been the subject of a test case in court. Her wide-ranging discussion brings out the important point that marriage is not just a symbolic gesture, an economic contract between two adults or a framework

This piece is reprinted from *Broadsheet* Hotoke/Winter 1996, p11-18. It has been shortened slightly and edited to make it clearer for a non-New Zealand audience. T&S thanks *Broadsheet* editorial collective and especially Jenny Rankine for permission to reuse material, for updating some of the information contained in the original article and for help in choosing English equivalents for Maori words and concepts.

for bringing up children, it is always enmeshed in the laws around all kinds of other things, such as immigration, inheritance, taxation and social benefits. Lesbian marriage would be a 'right' with complex and far-reaching knock-on effects for lesbians who chose to exercise it, and perhaps for others too.

Because marriage is so bound up with social arrangements more generally, the debate will be somewhat different in different countries, even if certain fundamental issues of political principle remain constant. In Sweden, for example, all cohabiting couples—married or unmarried, same-sex or heterosexual—are legally endowed with certain rights and responsibilities; at the same time, when it comes to social benefits, members of a couple/household are treated as economic individuals with an independent entitlement to state support (e.g. jobless women whose partners are in work can still receive unemployment pay). This is an important reason why many (though by no means all) Swedish lesbian feminists will acknowledge certain problems with the concept of lesbian marriage, but come down in the end on the side of 'having the choice'. As they see it, in one sense they lose nothing by having that choice; in another sense there is no choice, since Sweden's version of the marital model has been imposed on any and every cohabiting couple.

In the US on the other hand—a country more or less without a social welfare system—a very significant practical issue is that of health insurance, which is typically accessed through an employer and becomes unaffordable if you are jobless. Married people can get medical treatment on their partner's insurance policy (which will also cover their children). Since medical cover is both essential and very costly, it is not surprising that this should be perceived as a major form of discrimination against lesbian and gay couples—though legalising same-sex marriage is not the only solution campaigners on the issue have advocated. (Radicals would obviously prefer to reform the healthcare system!)

New Zealand's legal and social arrangements are not the same as Britain's, but not surprisingly given the colonial history of shared institutions they are more similar to ours than those of Sweden or the USA. Jenny Rankine's analysis of what's going on in NZ may sound some alarm bells for radical and lesbian feminists here: more positively, however, the author argues that this reopening of the marriage issue could provide an opportunity for feminists to question the whole marital model, with a view to gaining women more independence and autonomy both within and outside relationships.

New Zealand Justice Minister Doug Graham plans to introduce property rights law to parliament this year for de facto heterosexual and, under protest, same-sex couples. Revision of benefit rules to include same-sex couples is on the way. And six lesbians have taken the state to court to get the right to legally marry.

Marriage and de facto relationship issues haven't had this kind of airing among feminists and lesbians since the 1970s. And while all these law changes are being debated, drafted and introduced to parliament, feminists have their best opportunity in years to radically boost

all women's autonomy in relationships. I believe the most positive change for women will come from rejecting marriage as a model for all couple relationships, and insisting that the state treats everyone as an economic individual.

Heterosexual resistance to marriage is one of the more obvious social changes during the last generation. Women in de facto relationships in the city of Dunedin were interviewed by Vivienne Scott Melton, who found they did not want to be constructed as 'wives' by their partners, relatives or others. They deliberately chose not to get married because they wanted

equality and independence in their relationships.

At the same time, benefit rules and other laws have gradually recognised these de facto ('in fact' as opposed to 'de jure', that is 'in law') heterosexual relationships. The marriage model of one wage-earner supporting a dependent care-giving partner has been extended to 'relationships in the nature of marriage'.

Lesbians have also moved slowly towards visibility in family law, partly on the coat tails of heterosexual de facto couples and partly because of the Human Rights and Bill of Rights Acts. The full weight of these two Acts will not be felt until the year 2000, which is the government's deadline for removing discriminatory provisions from pre-existing laws.

Yet despite all the legal changes hovering in the wings, lesbians have barely begun to discuss how they want the law to treat them. The personal campaign for the right to marry waged by three lesbian couples has galvanised this major debate in New Zealand lesbian communities.

A test case

The lesbian High Court case was argued by human rights lawyer Rodney Harrison in April 1996. If the lesbians win the government will probably go to the Court of Appeal. Auckland barrister Errolyn Jones believes lesbian marriage is such a fundamental change to common law that the appeal may go all the way to the Privy Council. Whatever the outcome, the case will generate more lesbian visibility and debate about what marriage means in the 1990s.

The couples in the case were testing the 1955 Marriage Act against the Bill of Rights. The Bill includes the right to be free of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. If existing laws don't specifically discriminate—the Marriage Act does not specify partners' gender—then the courts have to interpret them consistently with the Bill. At the moment it is not the Act but the bureaucrats at registry offices who are effectively prohibiting lesbian marriage.

Hamilton lawyer Ruth Busch says the case is straightforward, and the only logical conclusion is that the three couples should be able to marry. However, the judge could decide that politicians should resolve the issue and duck the irresistible legal argument. 'If that happened, I would be asking what are the rest of my rights under the Bill of Rights Act worth?' says Ruth [see update at the end of this article].

A radical challenge?

To the christian right, who regard marriage as the core of their patch, the possibility of same-sex marriage is a major attack. However, many people share their ideal of monogamous marriage as the only valid environment for successful child rearing and positive family values. To assert that lesbians raise well-adjusted children and create valuable new kinds of families is a radical challenge to the ideas of 'marriage' and 'family'. Many feminists live their relationships as conscious alternatives and challenges to marriage. If lesbians argue for same-sex marriage by saying 'we can't help it' or 'we're just like you', the radical potential of these challenges is undermined.

In an internet debate on the issue, law professor Barbara Cox asked, 'what is more anti-patriarchal...than clearly stating that women can commit to one another with no man in sight?' Lindsay Quilter and Margy Pearl, two women whose relationship is at issue in the legal test case, argue that legal lesbian marriage invalidates the concept of male 'ownership' of women and overturns patrilineage, that is inheritance through the male line. The English lesbian psychologist Celia Kitzinger believes marriage would have to change if dykes did it. 'You can't simply add lesbians to institutions developed by heterosexuals and leave the institutions unchanged', she says.

While I share some of these views, I don't agree with some lesbians' assumptions that legal recognition of their relationships must automatically be good for lesbian communities. When the government wants to push as many women as possible into economic dependence on their partners, I cannot see lesbian pressure to be included in marriage as merely a personal 'choice' or a simple human rights issue.

Human rights: a limited lever?

From a radical feminist point of view, 'human rights' is a very limited lever for change. In New Zealand law only individuals have human rights, not groups. There is no provision for class action suits. Change to many exploitative situations relies on some gutsy person with enough money and privilege to survive two years of harassment or unemployment while their case chugs slowly through the Human Rights Commission process.

The law also protects everybody from every kind of discrimination, ignoring structured inequalities. So the Commission gets as many or



Grizelda Grizlingham



Grizelda Grizlingham

more complaints from Pakeha [white New Zealanders] about Maori 'racism' and from men about women's 'sexism' as the other way around. The Act protects the rights of heterosexuals and bisexuals against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, which makes women and lesbian-only venues and groups vulnerable. Human rights is a double edged sword, able to cut us as it protects us.

Compulsory coupledom

Feminists have resisted the compulsory coupledom of marriage. Married couples are supposed to act as a unit, sleep together all the time, satisfy each other's emotional needs and share any money or property. However, ex-lovers are often part of lesbian extended families and many feminists/lesbians value economic autonomy and independent friendships.

Lesbians and feminists have created a wide range of partnerships and living patterns. We live with flatmates and a lover, in different households from lovers, with lover and kids, with two lovers at the same time, in Maori and Pacific Islander extended family and parenting arrangements; we co-parent children as a couple, with friends or ex-lovers, with gay

couples who have fathered our children, or we may have no parenting role with our lover's kids; we practise serial monogamy, non-monogamy or non-genital lover relationships.

Heterosexuals already judge monogamous-live-together-share-everything lesbian relationships as more legitimate than other common lesbian patterns. The opportunity to marry will further validate this type of lesbian relationship, undermining other patterns. It will enable judges to rule on the nature and quality of lesbian relationships using heterosexual criteria.

Marriage: 'A dependence women hate'

The point of view so far missing in the public debate on lesbian marriage is the feminist critique of marriage as an anti-woman institution. The discussion has been between christian right opponents of everything lesbian, and liberal christians who support marriage as a human right. But adding lesbians to marriage still leaves married couples with legal privileges non-married couples don't get. It also doesn't touch benefit structures which force parenting, care-giving, unemployed, sick or disabled women to be economically dependent on a partner.

For most heterosexual women marriage is an economic institution shrouded in talk of 'building a life together'. A relationship with a man who has a paid job usually ensures young working women have a better standard of living than they could aspire to on their own or with another woman. The traditional assumption about marriage — that a woman swaps sexual and emotional services for a man's economic support — is never spelt out, though benefit rules make it brutally clear.

These days, most men expect their female partners to bring some money into the house if they can, but still be economically dependent. Most people still expect mothers in paid work to care for the household as well, while their male partners are only expected to do one job. Young women in the 1990s may sometimes scoff at feminist analyses of marriage; but five years on when they're caring full time for toddlers and he's the one in paid work, they often find they've lurched from supposed equality to a dependence they hate.

As long as women are primarily responsible for raising children and caring for sick relatives, women's jobs are treated as less important and paid less than men's, and men's jobs make it impossible to care for children as well, marriage will mean economic dependence for childrearing or caregiving women. If you think things are different now, talk to women who've left their kids to be raised by their male partners or men who stay at home while their female partners earn a good wage. They can tell you about the strength of societal expectations.

Money: no change?

Many women assume that marriage has changed because they no longer have to obey their husbands. They are unaware of the sexist laws underlying marriage until they split up. Women in the US lose up to 70 per cent of their standard of living when they leave a marriage, whereas their husbands may gain up to 40 per cent. Before the Marital Property Act in New Zealand, women did even worse. Current information isn't available, which in itself is telling. Family law observers agree however that the outcome is still much poorer for women than for men. Says Wellington lesbian social worker Anne Ruck: 'two years after a split, most of the women with children have descended into poverty, while husbands are 30 per cent better off'.

No-one knows if lesbian partners do any better, since there's no research on how lesbians divide shared assets. Couples where one partner is looking after children and the other is in paid work make up only a small percentage of lesbian relationships: they're the ones who will be directly affected by the sexist bias in Family Court judgements. However, unemployment is high. The courts are likely to treat wage-earning lesbians better when couples split up, while unemployed partners will do worse. Once benefit rules include lesbians, couples who split up would have to separate before either of them was entitled to benefit in her own right. This could leave a non-earning partner in poverty if they can't agree on a separation agreement and she has to wait over a year for a property settlement.

Family court judges persistently devalue the contribution of longterm homemakers to families. They also assume unrealistic opportunities exist for older women in the paid workforce. When women care for children their skills and knowledge from paid work gradually become out of date. Ruth Busch says the myth that equal property shares lead to equal outcomes for men and women ignores a sexist economy. The law focuses on past and present earning ability. Judges don't consider the breadwinner's future earning potential as a major relationship asset.

Although marital splits disadvantage wives, heterosexual women in de facto relationships come out even worse. Marital property law starts from an assumption of half shares in any property acquired after the marriage, no matter whose name it's in. It's the breadwinner's job to prove the non-earner should have a smaller share. To judge de facto splits, however, the Family Court uses constructive trust law. This law assumes a woman has no share of property in the man's name, and it's the woman's job to prove she contributed.

To show faith in their man, women often give up control over pooled money or let their partner keep the financial records. Men with money are more likely to know how to hide assets during a break-up, and their partners often don't have enough of their own money to hire experts to find and value these assets. Women not in paid work often can't support themselves during a lengthy separation process, so settle for less than they should, and many can't afford lawyers at all.

Grizelda Grizlingham



Many lesbians and heterosexual women go into relationships assuming that any earnings and property each partner has will stay theirs; but Doug Graham's proposed property law is likely to change this. Lesbian lawyer Ocean says legal recognition of lesbians in other countries has enabled greater state 'surveillance and regulation of lesbians, in return for the legal "right" of lesbians to fight each other in court over property'. Since cases are unpredictable and expensive, the court is a poor option for a caregiver left without economic support at the end of a relationship, Ocean says. If such a woman does take a case, the judges will decide whether the couple's relationship is legally acceptable: as Ocean comments, "This is an intolerable prospect for lesbians who wish to keep their power to define their own lesbian relationships". Property law which is designed to deal with inequalities between men and women will impact differently on same-sex couples, and is likely to have severe consequences for lesbians, since their earning potential as women is generally lower. And according to Ocean 'legal recognition' which enables lesbians to slug it out in court is also likely to lead to much greater policing of lesbians on benefits.

Whose benefit?

Marriage and benefit laws are like two parallel mazes which go off in different directions when you reach the same corners. For example, marriage law doesn't assume that a new partner is responsible for supporting kids from a previous relationship but New Zealand's benefit rules do. 'The current benefit system is grossly unfair to women', says Errolyn Jones. Women on benefits whose sexual partner moves in are treated like prostitutes: the state won't pay them if some man is around to do it. This is the marital model stripped of romance.

The government has been reluctant to include women's relationships in benefit definitions, says Errolyn, 'because it's a nightmare. You can get two women doing the washing, cooking for each other, sleeping in the same bed and perceived socially as a couple, and they may not be in a sexual relationship. Two lesbians living together are so similar to two heterosexual women friends living together'. But Treasury and other right-wing policy makers want the state to spend less on benefits. Under this regime, closing the benefit loophole around lesbian relationships has been on the cards for several years, especially since the Human Rights Amendment Act and the Bill of Rights Act. The High Court lesbian marriage case may have pushed the policy makers along.

I'm not saying lesbians should keep their invisibility and the protection it gives them from snooping, dobbing in [grassing to the authorities] and punitive responses to women's sexuality. No-one should be treated like that. The most obvious way towards women's economic independence is for everyone to be treated by the state as economic individuals, whether we're in relationships or not. The Royal Commission on Social Policy in 1988 recommended a standard individual benefit rate, with an extra 20 per cent for people living alone. A strong movement is essential to counter the government's insistence on the marriage model for benefits.

Where do we go from here?

There are many possibilities for radical changes to relationship law. For example, we could demand a coherent, flexible law which can deal with the wide range of living arrangements we choose, and which will override our choices only in clear cases of unfairness or where a vulnerable partner needs protecting. We could argue

for a range of legal partner arrangements, of different durations with different conditions. We could lobby for the state to treat all relationships equally for parenting, inheritance, property division, immigration and other aspects of our lives where discrimination exists. Then we can decide whether to register our relationships or make our own arrangements.

Meanwhile, lesbians and other women in de facto relationships still have fewer rights than married couples in all the areas mentioned above. The laws would each need to be changed to provide equality for all kinds of relationships. Some selected anomalies are:

Property: all couples, not just married ones, should have any property they have jointly contributed to divided equally, and future earning power should be a major consideration. However, the law should not assume that couples will automatically share property. Married couples can already contract to keep some property separate or opt out of the Matrimonial Property Act provisions. Other couples need to do this too.

Parenting: if two lesbians decide to have a child and raise it together, the non-biological parent has to apply to the court for guardianship, whereas married lesbians would automatically both be guardians.

Immigration: people who marry New Zealanders automatically get residency. De facto and lesbian partners have to prove a 'genuine and stable' relationship by showing shared accommodation, income, bank accounts and photos. De facto heterosexual partners must have been together for two years and same-sex couples for four. The law should treat all relationships equally.

Next of kin: your automatic next of kin are set out in the Law of Succession, which ignores de facto and same sex relationships. Next of kin can visit you in hospital, get medical information and coroners' reports and make decisions about your care if you are unable to communicate. Single women cannot choose a close friend over family members. De facto and same-sex partners may be included as part of a major review of the law. Says Nigel Christie of the NZ Law Commission, 'it wouldn't stop a family from contesting it, but they wouldn't have the same chance of success as they have now'.

All people should be able to easily nominate a next of kin by, say, filling in a form at a Post

Office rather than having to pay lawyers' fees.

Official definitions of 'family': in their analysis of the 1991 census, the department of statistics defined a family as an adult heterosexual couple or parent/s and children. Government policy on families remains rigidly heterosexual and monocultural, ignoring families of choice and extended families. We need to fight for recognition of all kinds of families.

Official recognition of lesbians: how many forms have you read that just ask for 'marital status'? In the last few censuses, some dykes have written 'lesbian' over every option. Just because some lesbians might be able to tick 'married' in future may not make lesbians any more visible. Demand that the government recognises and counts lesbians.

Finally, while some of the systems are getting a major shake-up, let's try to build coalitions which will get all of us greater independence and autonomy — in and out of relationships.

Update:

Since this piece was originally published in New Zealand, the three lesbian couples have lost their case. The judge decided that Parliament rather than the courts should deal with the issue. However, an appeal has been lodged and will be heard in 1997. Doug Graham's proposed new law on property division failed to materialise when an election was called earlier this year, but observers expect some kind of proposal to be brought forward in the near future. □



Grizelda Grizlingham

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

In the 1970s feminists asked 'YBA Wife?'. 20 years on it's worth reviving the question as politicians, united in their obsession with 'family values' and cutting welfare costs, bring in an alarming new divorce law. Jill Radford reports.

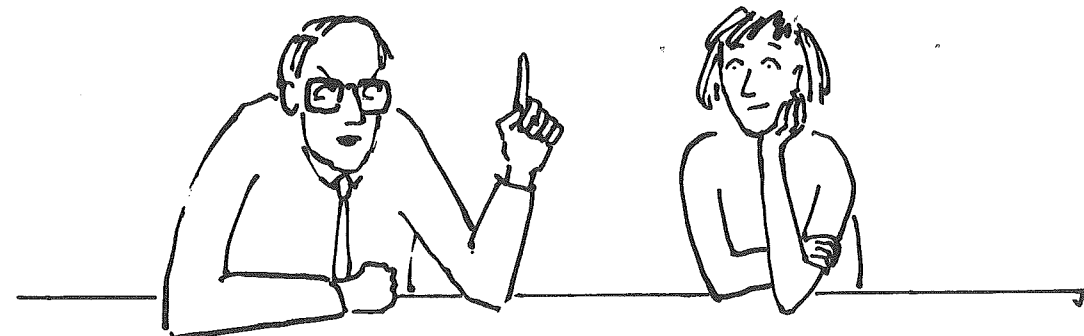
In June 1996, the Family Law Act received Royal Assent and became law, likely to be implemented in 1998. This Act represents the most far reaching and fundamental 'reform' of the divorce laws of England and Wales since 1967 and will affect all those seeking divorce after 1998. It provides for a new process for divorce and separation, scrapping 'quickie' divorces, and introducing 'no fault divorce' after a compulsory 12-18 month waiting period. It attempts to shift divorce away from the legal process by expanding the role of mediation to the point that legal aid will no longer be available for legal services, but only for mediation. While Part 4 of the Act, which aims to simplify and streamline the procedure for applying for domestic violence injunctions, is to be welcomed, this article argues that the reformed divorce process represents serious bad news for women and children and concludes by

suggesting it is certainly time to ask again: YBA wife?

From the very beginning, the Family Law Bill was controversial. At one point it threatened to bring down the government and almost led to the resignation of its architect, the Lord Chancellor, Lord MacKay. In September 1995, the Tory far right and family fundamentalist MPs, under the guidance of Families Need Fathers and disparate men's lobbies, began mobilising opinion against the Government's proposals on divorce law reform. This grouping had latched on to an earlier Bill, the Domestic Violence Family Homes 1994 (DVFH) Bill, when it had almost completed its Parliamentary journey. The political fuse they ignited blew out the DVFH Bill (which aimed to offer better protection for women by streamlining and simplifying the law around injunctions). The *Daily Mail* in October 1996 ran a series of

women have spread themselves too thin with this juggling of marriage, career, and children

right as usual dear, marriage will have to go



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articles claiming the measures were 'anti-marriage' as they offered equal protection to married and unmarried women. By November 1995, the survival of these measures and those contained in the Government White Paper 'Looking to the Future: Mediation and the Ground for Divorce', was seriously questioned. However, a revised Family Law Bill which included both sets of provisions, with only modest concessions to the far right, was drafted and introduced into Parliament.

With this history, it is not surprising that the Family Law Bill had a stormy ride. It was labelled by *The Guardian* as 'the most controversial piece of legislation since the Poll tax'. As product of compromise with the far right, family fundamentalists of both main parties, and, it needs to be said, token acknowledgement of feminist concerns around domestic violence, Paul Boateng's depiction — a 'dog's dinner and deeply flawed' — is fitting. The *Guardian's* headline claim: 'Divorce: a law nobody wants' was one of the more apt.

Marriage saving or cheap and cheerful divorce?

A stated aim of the Act, is to make divorce less expensive to the state, by reducing the cost to the Legal Aid Board. Reasons why the costs of divorce are presently so high include the high cost of legal services and the large number of people seeking divorce. A recent study (L Radford 1994) found that women going through a divorce have faced costs of up to

£10,000, so the aim of cost cutting appears attractive. With two in five marriages ending in divorce, the UK has the highest divorce rate in Europe; in the 1990s, on average 300,000 adults and 150,000 children are involved in divorce each year. 175,000 divorces were granted in 1995. Most divorces are initiated by women: 71% in 1994. Of these, 76% were granted to women on the basis of male 'misconduct' (22% adultery and 54% unreasonable behaviour) which in practice usually means physical, sexual or emotional violence to the woman and/or children. Under the present system, when women petition on 'fault based' grounds, a divorce is usually finalised within seven months. The aim of cutting the public cost of divorce, or shifting it to the private sphere of individual responsibility, is one shared by all political parties. Only a small but hardworking band of feminist activists was concerned that any savings in public spending are once again at women's expense, and to male advantage.

Cheap and cheerful divorce

How precisely this cost cutting is to be achieved has proved more difficult to decipher. One way proposed in the Government White paper by making divorce more amicable by removing lawyers from the process. Dominant representations of lawyers depicts them as being both too expensive and responsible for the acrimony of the divorce process. Rather than recognising the pain and problems which stem from marriage and the behaviour of married men, these

representations focus on the processes of marriage dissolution.

Under the Family Law Act, instead of each party to a divorce seeking independent legal advice and instructing a solicitor to act on their behalf, couples seeking divorce will be expected to reach an agreement, with the help of a mediator, regarding both the future of any children and any property and financial matters. Legal aid for legal representation will be now refused, except in particular circumstances (which have not been specified), and allowed only for the services of mediators. The presumption is that the costs of mediation will be lower than legal fees. National Family Mediation, one of the two main mediation bodies in the UK, is a voluntary sector organisation, with unpaid management groups, small numbers of part-time staff and volunteers. As one solicitor commented:

Part-time, middle class, middle aged, ex-Relate (staff) may seem a good idea, but they have insufficient experience to get the end result in all issues mediation. If the courts are going to regulate the proposed orders properly, the lists will become terminally clogged, whilst poor judges try to ascertain if anyone did get to the truth of financial issues and if consent was given truly and freely. Or are we going to abandon the quest for justice and fairness?

Marriage saving

The second approach to cost-cutting is to make divorce more difficult, so fewer people, (i.e. women) will seek divorce. Jane Lewis noted that prior to the publication of the Government White Paper, Lord MacKay spoke of introducing measures to cut the rate of divorce. She also documents how, as the Family Law Bill proceeded through Parliament, concern with marriage-saving increased:

In November 1995 the Lord Chancellor commented that 'the debate has been as much about marriage as it has been about the finer details of the divorce system'. By April 1996 in standing committee Labour and Conservative MPs were calling for the Bill to give more explicit support to marriage. Edward Leigh QC said he wanted to shift the whole debate and emphasis of the Bill towards saving marriages. Paul Boateng joined in, desiring that the Bill 'should not simply be a vehicle for the dissolution of marriage, but a means by which marriage might be supported'.

Jane Lewis points out that the idea of marriage saving via divorce legislation is not new, but there is little either in its history or in the realities of current trends in behaviour to indicate it might be successful in the late 1990s. Her very interesting article looks at the history of marriage in twentieth century UK and notes that it was in the decades following 1945 that

marriage became increasingly the norm and took place at increasingly younger ages. While there was an increase in (hetero) sexual activity outside marriage and increased pregnancy rate, there was still a tendency to marry before childbirth. The 1970s, she argues, demonstrated a different pattern, with substantial declines in marriage rates, increasingly older marriage, a huge rise in divorce rates and the emergence of widespread cohabitation. She concludes that: 'While the 1960s saw a separation of sex and marriage, the 1980s have seen more of a separation between marriage and parenthood'. Confirming Jane Lewis's argument, recent figures from the Office of Population Census and Surveys showed 299,197 marriages in 1993, the lowest figure since 1945.

It appears then that attempts to cut the cost of divorce is to be achieved by simultaneously making divorce more amicable and more difficult — contradictory aims by any reckoning.

Cutting the crap

This contradiction can only be resolved by examining the new law in more detail and within a feminist analysis which recognises the centrality of gender to marriage as institutionalised heterosexuality.

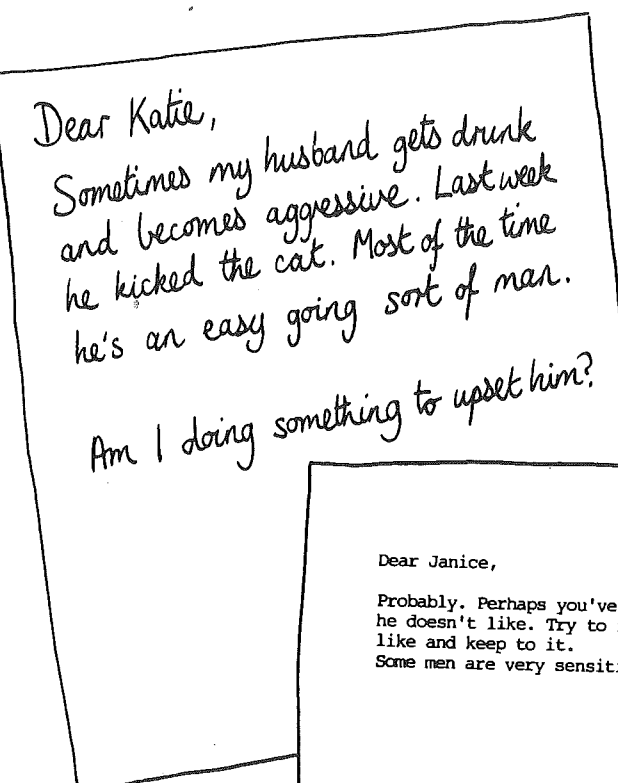
Part 1 of the Family Law Act provides a new process for divorce and separation. It scraps 'quickie divorces' by introducing 'no fault' divorce after a 12- 18 month waiting period. Under the new provisions:

- i) irrevocable breakdown of marriage becomes the only ground of divorce;
- ii) compulsory information is to be given to divorcing couples;
- iii) divorce will only be granted following a fixed period of reflection during which arrangements for the future are agreed;
- iv) the role of family mediation is to be expanded.

Irretrievable breakdown of marriage as the sole grounds of divorce

The rhetoric here is that divorce will be more amicable if it is forward looking, rather than focusing on past (mis)behaviour. This ends the so called 'quickie divorces' granted on the basis of 'fault', eg a man's adultery or domestic violence. This measure was opposed in Parliament by those on the right of the Tory party, who argued that divorce on demand, their representation of this proposal, would weaken

the institution of marriage by removing its moral basis. From a feminist perspective 'no fault divorce' is also seen as problematic in that it will doubtless serve to deny the reality of men's disrespectful behaviour to women, and women's increasing refusal to put up with it. No fault divorce is likely both to deny men's wrongs, and women's rights to live free from violence and abuse. From a research perspective, the masking of 'unreasonable behaviour' within a liberal



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notion of irrevocable breakdown of marriage, will also remove domestic violence from divorce records. So an important source of empirical data regarding the prevalence of domestic violence and women's willingness to name and resist it will be lost.

Receiving compulsory information

It will become mandatory for divorcing couples to receive information about divorce and its consequences. In principle this should cause no problem. Feminist organisations, like Rights of Women, in providing a legal advice line, have long recognised that without high quality information, women cannot make informed



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choices. However I seriously doubt if the government's aim in providing mandatory information is facilitate women in taking power and control over their lives. I suggest their aims are more mixed. It seems likely that the information sessions will be focused on deterring rather than facilitating divorce. Issues of quality also arise since it is the government's intention to exclude lawyers from the information-giving process. Clearly the value of any information given by non-lawyers and separated from advice has to be questionable. It is doubtful whether any such information can be given in a sufficiently flexible way to cater for the different needs and circumstances of women from different cultural backgrounds and in a diversity of languages.

The Bill's initial proposals required divorcing parties to attend public information sessions. This highly inappropriate requirement, tantamount to requiring a public announcement of intentions to divorce, could generate all manner of embarrassing scenarios, and rob a woman of any confidentiality, exposing her to the danger of (further) violence. Imagine sitting next to Princess Di to be told what bad girls we are for wanting to divorce. The level of disquiet amongst politicians briefed by Rights of Women at the spectre of public humiliation sessions led to the public element being dropped, but only in the very last minute compromise. Public sessions have now been replaced by promises that such information will now be given on a one to one basis and will include information about how to seek protection against domestic violence. However the final form of information giving has not been specified, but like other crucial details, left to guidelines which do not need discussion in Parliament. However, earlier concerns about compulsion, the quality of information, whether it will be aimed at deterring or facilitating divorce, and the questions of cultural and language diversity remain. It seems to me that if the information is be valuable, it would not be made compulsory.

Fixed period of reflection

As initially published, the Bill, enscripting the government's commitment to ending 'quickie' divorces, included provisions for a one year waiting period between the filing a 'statement of marital breakdown' and a divorce being granted. This, in official rhetoric, provides an opportunity to reflect on whether the marriage can be

saved and to make arrangements regarding the future of any children and financial and property matters. As Lord MacKay put it:

Many of those who divorce regret having done so. I hope and expect that the period for reflection and consideration envisaged under the reformed divorce process will result in the avoidance of some of these hasty divorces, because the process of considering the value of marriage and the consequences of divorce will happen before divorce, not after as happens now. (*The Guardian* 24/2/96)

Rights of Women lobbied strongly against a compulsory waiting period, arguing that:

- Women spend a long time reflecting and agonizing over the decision to seek divorce before starting the process. Once a decision has been made, women usually want to get on with the divorce in order to rebuild their own and their children's lives with minimum stress;
- A one year waiting period, may serve to keep women and children in situations of uncertainty and insecurity as issues about who will live in the family home, what happens about the children or the mortgage repayments, are unresolved at this point. Questions about how an obstructive man can be made to leave the home or what is to prevent him salting the assets away can arise during this year of uncertainty;
- Women may find themselves trapped for a further year in relationships with violent men, putting them and their children at further risk of violence, stress and insecurity;
- Where there are no children or property issues to resolve, the waiting period serves no purpose;
- In any circumstances the idea of a compulsory waiting period is both patronising and unlikely to achieve the level of reconciliation the Lord Chancellor anticipates;
- As the Act also provides that a statement of marital breakdown cannot be filed in the first year of marriage, if the relationship breaks down within the first three months, for example, then the waiting period is expanded to 21 months — for no particular reason.
- Compared with reforms in other countries, the Family Law Act is unusual in not distinguishing between consensual divorces, and those where issues are unresolved; other jurisdictions allow for quicker divorces where both parties have agreed things at the outset.

During Parliamentary debate, right wingers

and family fundamentalists orchestrated a campaign to increase the waiting period: in April 1996, they won a free vote in the House of Commons, increasing it to 18 months, and in May 1996 they were successful in adding in a further three month delay making for a total waiting period of 21 months. However as a part of the last minute package of compromises, the waiting period was effectively restored to 12/18 months agreed on an earlier free vote.

As a consequence of feminist lobbying, there is now a specific provision that where there is proof of domestic violence (i.e. a non-molestation or occupation order is in force), the waiting period is limited to 12 months. However the necessity of obtaining a court order means that women who do not apply for an order, or whose applications are refused, will not be able to use this provision. Refusal to recognise domestic violence as the norm rather than as exceptional for women seeking divorce, has led to this requirement of proof.

While the outcome in relation to the waiting period is better than it might have been, feminist concerns, particularly in relation to domestic violence, remain.

Expansion of the role of family mediation

The Family Law Act proposals make mediation compulsory for women on legal aid, except in narrowly defined circumstances. Over the last ten years, mediation has become an increasingly popular mode of alternative dispute resolution (AD). Its ideology is that settlements which both parties have helped to negotiate are likely to be the most cost effective, most likely to be adhered to, least traumatic and less damaging for children. Transferring divorce from a framework which aimed to protect the legal rights of the divorcing parties to one which emphasises mediated outcomes, supposedly cuts the expense and acrimony of divorce. As well as leading to 'cheap and cheerful' divorce, its proponents claim a further advantage of mediation is that it is more likely to facilitate marriage saving:

The introduction of mediation will increase the chances of couples choosing to step through the door of reconciliation, because in working out matters in relation to their finance, property and children, and thereby perhaps re-learning their ability to communicate with each other, couples may realise the value of what they have considered giving up to the extent that they will think again. (Lord MacKay, *The Guardian* 24.2.96)

The shift to mediation as the central plank of the new divorce proposals is shared by the Lord Chancellor, the Legal Aid Board and all major political parties. So despite the element of compulsion this was one of the few uncontroversial provisions of the Bill in Parliament. Government faith in mediation was bolstered by selective reading of findings from a study by the Relate Centre for Family Studies at the University of Newcastle (1994). This study claimed positive results for mediation, with couples reporting they had reached agreed settlements, improved communications and found ways to continue being joint parents. However a closer reading of the study shows that its questionnaires were only returned by 54 users of 'all issues mediation', a self selecting group, all of whom had access to their own solicitors during mediation. Even then 20% failed to reach agreement on any issues, and only 39% agreed everything. An alternative survey conducted by the Solicitors Family Law Association (SFLA) found 48% of their clients would not feel comfortable with a mediated solution, less than 33% thought issues could be amicably resolved by a mediator.

The SFLA are further concerned by the fact that at present mediators are completely unregulated. Anyone can set up a mediators service without any training or belonging to a regulatory body. The Family Law Act does not deal with the regulation of mediators, but does provide for the setting of standards for legally aided mediation work by the Legal Aid Board. However, it seems as though mediation will remain unregulated where it is not paid for through legal aid. As yet, it remains unclear what any standards regarding mediation might be, and specifically to what extent they will address issues of cultural and language differences.

A second survey conducted by Relate itself (Feb 1996) found stronger opposition to mediation amongst family lawyers who had undertaken mediation training (82%), than amongst those who had not (61%). This survey concluded that the more lawyers are involved in mediation the more opposed they are to pushing people into it.

Sentiments expressed in these debates contrasted markedly with those expressed by 'the right minded' in relation to the most publicised divorce of the century. In relation to the Royal Divorce, Ruaridh Nicoll reported in the *The Guardian* 27.7.96 that:

(The Queen in December 1995) 'urged the couple to stop speculating about their marriage and end it forthwith'.

The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh are thought to be keen for a swift end to the protracted divorce negotiations.

John Major 'is keen to have the Royal divorce out of the way before the summer recess'.

Another case of one law for the rich and another for the poor?

The assumption of equality

Feminists have criticised the discriminatory approach which makes mediation compulsory for people on legal aid, while permitting the better off to pay privately for legal representation. However feminist analysis goes beyond this by raising fundamental questions about the nature of mediation in the context of the gender power relations underpinning heterosexual relationships and their breakdown. The assumption of equality between women and men which underpins mediation results in it not being the gender neutral process it claims to be. Power imbalances in relationships do not evaporate because the couple is no longer living together or a decision has been taken to seek divorce. Mediators generally use the method of holding joint meetings with the separating parties. Their focus is on the future with past behaviour, including violence or abuse, being ignored or deemed irrelevant. A woman who has been worn down by previous arguments or humiliations, is not likely to want to negotiate with her ex. As Lorraine Radford and Marianne Hester have pointed out:

There is less scope for an abused woman to give 'her story' in mediation, where she may be sitting in the same room as the abuser. If she has no opportunity to voice her fears then conflict may well be increased rather than reduced following mediation because the woman will be exposed to unnecessary risk...

...Women's fears at attending meetings tend to be interpreted as lack of co-operation. Because a woman has separated from the abuser it is assumed the violence has stopped and she is no longer at risk. In fact one mediator interviewed argued it would empower a woman if she was forced to confront her fears and meet the abuser... Most premises we visited in the research project lacked security facilities. Many made no provision for the safe entry and exit of women from the building. At one centre a woman was stabbed by her partner in the corridor when leaving. At another a woman was beaten up during a videotaped mediation session. (Lorraine Radford, ROW Bulletin Autumn/Winter 1994)

Where violence existed in a relationship, a man can resort to subtle threats to control a woman within the mediation setting, which may not be picked up by mediators. It is not surprising that women frequently experience mediation as disempowering, while men, particularly abusive men, find it strengthening. In this context, mediation can be a coercive process with women feeling trapped into 'agreements' which are not in her best interests through fear of her husband or pressure to appease a mediator. Further if the man can afford to instruct a solicitor privately, the situation can arise in which he may be legally advised throughout the mediation process, leaving the woman reliant on a mediator to protect her interests.

There is no empirical evidence from England and Wales regarding the effectiveness of mediation in relation to long term settlements. Evidence from other countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where similar 'reforms' were introduced in the early 1990s, indicates that women gain less from mediated settlements than their former husbands. It seems a particular irony that by the 1990s, when women are beginning to realise their legal rights more effectively, with more women qualifying as solicitors and barristers, and more advice centres providing women-centred legal advice, the government is concerned to shift away from a legal rights approach for the vagaries of mediation.

Ignoring women and children's safety

The forward looking rhetoric of mediation further serves to sweep aside women's fears for their own and their children's safety. Issues regarding domestic violence or child abuse, if raised at all, are frequently swept aside as past history. It is the mediator who has the power to decide whether or not mediation is appropriate.

With the best will in the world, mediators have a vested interest in funnelling clients to the services they provide, rather than towards solicitors. Not only is there a financial interest involved in bringing money into mediation ... but also a desire to show that mediation works in cases of marital breakdown. And lastly, but not least, mediators are not usually legally qualified. Poor quality advice will inevitably impinge most on women, who will rarely have the resources to pay for a solicitor to safeguard their interests before accepting a mediated settlement, once more creating a power imbalance between the parties at a crisis point in their relationship. (Lorraine Radford, ROW Bulletin Autumn/Winter 1994)

If the mediator does not certify that mediation is inappropriate in certain cases a woman will have to convince a judge that she is not merely being obstructive to obtain legal representation. Despite an increasing acceptance of feminist arguments that domestic violence can not be mediated, it is not clear who will be excused from mediation. No firm commitment that mediation is unsuitable in the context of domestic violence has been made.

It is eminently clear that women will lose out in a process which replaces the protection of legal rights with mediated outcomes. Feminists have also expressed concern about the extent to which mediation addresses the welfare, safety and wishes of children. Since the Children Act 1989, welfare professionals have interpreted the best interests of the child as being served by contact with a father, even when the father has been violent or abusive to the child. Despite the fact that the Children Act includes the wishes of the children in its check list, few mediators in fact bother to ascertain their wishes by talking to them directly. In consequence, in England and Wales, children have to show clear signs of physical or psychological damage before contact can be stopped. Rights of Women has been working around this issue for several years and has found that inappropriate contact orders frequently put both women and children at risk of further violence, while there is no evidence that contact between children and violent fathers is of value to the child. Lorraine Radford also makes the point that 'the overwhelming majority of women were further abused by their ex-partners as a result of contact arrangements.'

As a consequence of lobbying, the issue of safety and protection of children has been recognised in the Family Law Act in a clause which allows domestic violence to be considered as a factor in child contact considerations, although this same provision, by reintroducing 'conduct' as an issue, could also be used against lesbian mothers.

Pension splitting

Something needs to be said on the question of pension splitting as this was the major concession secured by the Labour Party in the last-minute compromises which saved the Family Law Act. When Paul Boateng reiterated his point that: 'no Family Law Bill... will pass this House that does not have written on its face the regulations contained in our amendment' the

Government conceded and allowed pension splitting at the point of divorce. This will allow a woman to receive and reinvest a share of her husband's pension, rather than having to wait until he retires. This provision is only likely to benefit those women who were married to men with good pension entitlements. It is interesting that the Labour party chose to take its stand on the pensions issue, rather than the denial of legal aid for legal representation, and the



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emphasis on mediation which will negatively affect far greater numbers of women. No doubt their sell-out on these points was a deliberate strategy to avoid being seen as not supporting 'the family'.

Part 4 of the Family Law Act reinstates, albeit with some concessions to the far right, the provisions of the ill-fated Domestic Violence Family Homes Bill. Its aim is to stream-line and simplify the process of obtaining injunctions against violent husbands or partners, by providing protection orders, available from a single court for both married and unmarried women. Recognising that violence does not necessarily end with the formal ending of a relationship, it enables former spouses and cohabitants to use these remedies. It also strengthens injunctions or protection orders, as they will now be called, by making a presump-

tion in favour of powers of arrest being attached. Surprisingly, expected hostility from the far right did not resurface in relation to Part 4 of the Family Law Bill. They were content with voicing rhetoric about the sanctity of marriage and warnings about male cohabitants being ousted from their homes on the basis of spurious allegations of violence.

While the specific details of these provisions remain too complex to summarise here, it is worth mentioning that this section of the Act also contains amendments to the Children Act 1989 allowing for the protection of children by excluding an abusive man from the home in interim care orders or emergency protection orders if:

- the court is satisfied there is reasonable cause to believe that, if the person is excluded, the child would cease to suffer or cease to be likely to suffer significant harm and
- the caring parent remaining in the home can provide reasonable care and consents to the exclusion requirement.

These provisions extend powers available to the court where a Local Authority makes application for emergency protection order or interim care order by allowing the abusive parent, rather than the child, to be removed from the family home. Although these orders can have powers of arrest attached, their efficacy is reduced by the fact they are short term solutions only. A Local Authority is not empowered to

make free standing or long term applications for the removal of an abusing parent.

Bad news for wives

This article has not been able to cover every aspect of the new Family Law Act; Rights of Women has produced a comprehensive guide in the Summer 1996 *Bulletin*. However, from what has been said here, it is clear that with the exception of Part 4, the Family Law Act is not good news for married women. This is recognised by many family solicitors, one of whom has pointed out that because legal aid will still be granted for legal actions which start with injunction applications, there will be a positive incentive for solicitors to begin proceedings by seeking injunctive remedies, to get round the rules which disallow legal aid for legal representation in divorce.

Given the new hurdles to divorce introduced in the Family Law Act, presumably once word gets around women will respond by choosing to live outside of marriage. Given that legally there is increasingly less distinction between marriage and cohabitation, women may come to reject any form of institutionalised forms of heterosexuality, and possibly heterosexuality itself. Certainly at the present time, the best advice to women is that offered by Rights of Women and followed by Princess Di:

If you are thinking of getting married, be very careful, if you are thinking of separating — divorce now. ☐

Maragaret Greenfields 'Divorce Made Simple? The Family Law Bill 1996' (*Rights of Women Bulletin*, Summer 1996).

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Walker, McCarthy and Timms *Mediation: The Making and Remaking of Co-operative Relationships* (Relate Centre for Family Studies, University of Newcastle on Tyne, 1994).



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Soft Soap

Brookside was supposed to be different from other soap operas — more political, more hard-hitting in its treatment of social issues and especially, more responsive to feminist concerns. Women's lives are central to soap opera as a genre, but Brookside promised to treat women's experience in a less traditional and patronising way than its more established rivals. Has the promise been kept? Vicki Coppock looks back over storylines past and present, and comes to the conclusion it's a load of old flannel.

The first episode of *Brookside* appeared on our TV screens back in November 1982 when it was broadcast on the opening night of the launch of Channel Four. In so far as it proclaimed itself to be 'different', 'distinctive' and 'alternative' the programme reflected the aspirations of the new Channel itself. The pre- and post-launch hype promised much — a new era in both the content and 'form' of the traditional soap. Phil Redmond, *Brookside's* creator and Executive Producer, spoke of the programme's commitment to 'realism' — both at the level of narrative and technical production. Redmond also made much of his intention to ensure that the programme gave time and space to 'women's issues' (cited in *Woman* 4 December, 1982). Many of us might have been (and, in truth, probably were) optimistically drawn into anticipating a new dawn in British television drama, seduced into suspending our critical gaze by the promise of progressive, radical, alternative viewing. The extent to which *Brookside* has lived up to, or failed to live up to, the generous optimism which greeted it in 1982 is the focus of this article. The research and

analysis are derived from two closely related projects — an unpublished M.A. thesis and a recently published co-authored book *The Illusions of 'Post-Feminism': New Women, Old Myths*. These projects draw on interviews I conducted with people involved in the programme.

Representations: Lagging behind?

A central proposition of the 'post-feminism' debate is that sex discrimination legislation and equal opportunities policies have virtually eradicated inequality between the sexes. *The Illusions of 'Post-Feminism'* demonstrates that this proposition is simply unsustainable, whether at the level of women's interpersonal relationships or at the level of institutions such as education, work and the media. And, just as equal opportunities legislation has lagged behind reality, so social and cultural representations of women have lagged behind the law. Beneath the veneer of equality and 'alternative' images of 'new liberated women' lie the established misogynist messages.

Writing in last Winter's issue of *T&S*, Dee

Dee Glass struck an all too familiar chord in her analysis of the relationship between women employed in British television and the production of women's programmes:

The sad fact is that while there are now more women employed (though unevenly) throughout television, it is actually harder to make programmes with any kind of feminist agenda (p 40).

Both this work and the analysis developed in *The Illusions of 'Post-Feminism'* expose the contradiction between discourses which proclaim equality for women in the media — both at the level of production and representation — and the reality of persistent media sexism. Not only does the media reflect prevailing sexist ideology (thereby providing an important barometer of women's position in general), it also has an active role to play in constructing sexist ideology. Meanings do not simply live in images — they circulate between the representation, the receiver of the image and the wider society. The receiver of the image plays an active role in the process of creating meaning. For example, 'knowledge about women' portrayed in the media is always produced from something believed to be 'already known', which then acts as its seal of approval and endows it with 'truth'. So when media messages coincide with and reinforce existing ideas and values widely held in society, the effect is cumulative and very powerful. As Ruth Berton commented in her book *Looking On*, images of glamorous women or perfect mothers may not correspond to the experience of most women, but they do define femininity in ways which are perceived as actually existing. In this sense the signifying practices of the media are inextricably connected to personal and collective identity.

Although media sexism cannot be divorced or isolated from other oppressions, nor decontextualised from the history of those oppressions, nevertheless the value of critical feminist media analysis needs to be recognised. It can provide a framework within which the ideas and assumptions which inform the representation of women's lives can be teased out. Moreover, it pursues its analysis at both the visible, transparent level of appearances and content and also at the less obvious, below-surface level of hidden meaning and context.

A woman-centred programme?

Dee Dee Glass highlights three conditions which must be fulfilled before a programme can

be considered to be truly 'woman-centred':

- that it is consciously, transparently and aggressively non-exploitative of those who do not own society;
- that it must interrogate, explain and offer alternatives to dominant ideology;
- that it must be awash with clear ideas for change — either overtly systemic or in thinking and then in action.

So how does *Brookside* measure up on this basis? In a glossy public relations brochure published in 1988, Phil Redmond stated:

the soap opera genre, heavily centred on domestic, 'maternal' events, has typically provided strong women characters of special interest to its presumed female audience. *Brookside* does not fit easily into the sex-stereotyping formula. Though it has at times been criticised by feminists for not doing enough for women, this charge would be difficult to sustain over the life-span of the serial (p 27).

Closer examination of *Brookside's* women characters over some fourteen years of episodes tells a somewhat different story. Such an examination reveals consistent assumptions about women and the way in which stereotyped definitions of women — in terms of motherhood, sexuality, race and political identity — are constructed and sustained.

Motherhood and family

As early as March 1983 (just four months into the serial) Christine Geraghty critically commented that *Brookside* stood guilty of reinforcing sexual stereotyping rather than representing women or women's issues in any radical or challenging way. She noted in particular how the women characters were defined by their roles within the family — Sheila Grant, Annabel Collins and Doreen Corkhill were classic examples in the early years. Sheila Grant was always portrayed as a woman of strength with views of her own, often faced with difficult decisions in her life. But Sheila's commitment to her Open University course was frequently undermined by storylines which pulled her back into her role as wife and mother. In the development of her character beyond her eventual divorce from Bobby Grant, Sheila was portrayed on the surface as a more 'liberated' woman in her relationship with Billy Corkhill. However, an opportunity to see Sheila establishing an independent life for herself was not grasped. As Eithne Browne, the actor who played Chrissy Rogers, commented during interview, the story was written in such a way that Sheila needed a

man to be able to leave Bobby and set up home again in 'the Close'. Sue Johnston, who played Sheila Grant, expressed similar disappointment with the character,

I was really sad that it ended up her becoming even more of an appendage to another man (Billy) and the studies disappeared. I felt that was when I started to lose my interest in Sheila Grant.

Interestingly, the Chrissy Rogers character was to suffer a similar fate. In 1990 a woman scriptwriter for *Brookside* remarked during interview that she found Chrissy to be the worst example of sex-stereotyping, 'She's always this slightly ratty, but underneath it, loving mother, and I wish she'd fucking well stop it!'. As with Sheila Grant, storylines focused on Chrissy's self-sacrificial devotion to her family. Eithne Browne was equally frustrated with the character:

She started off as a really strong mother who would go and fight for her children and what she believed was right. That was for about the first eighteen months and then I thought she was a good character and I believed in her all the way. Then after that you just never saw her out of the kitchen and it was very lack-lustre and very unbelievable.

By 1992 Chrissy had transformed into a discontented, dissatisfied woman who had 'out-grown' her husband, eventually to leave her family and resume her long-abandoned teacher-training career. What had changed? The truth was that Eithne Browne had had enough,

There are only two ways around it — you just keep going on, trying, with your character, or you just keep your head down and take the money. I couldn't do that and it did come to a head to head conflict... 'if you don't like it, go'.

Eithne's explanation was supported independently by one of the women scriptwriters, 'The minute they get uppity they get elbowed out it seems to me... I'm not sure she wanted to go so much as she was bolshy as an actress!'. Chrissy's disillusionment was only reinforced by a final storyline which appeared to re-invigorate the character,

They suddenly wanted Chrissy to have this outgoing life when they knew I was leaving... I just felt complete betrayal of the character... My argument would be they could have written these things months back, years back.

But Eithne had broader concerns than just those surrounding her own character:

I don't believe that the programme is really indicative of the way women really are, and the pressures that women really face, and the fantastic jobs that mothers and women really do... When you have this very downtrodden image of women where if they can't cope they just leave, you give



'Becoming even more of an appendage'
— Sue Johnston plays Sheila Grant getting married to Billy Corkhill

women nothing to feel good about. Why are there no single women on *Brookside*? Why can't women achieve on their own?... There is a very macho, misogynist feel in the way women are being portrayed by *Brookside* as the deceivers, as the leavers, and all these poor men are left behind...

Discourse around the sanctity of motherhood is very powerful. Two women scriptwriters for *Brookside* explained how this had been particularly significant in the storyline conferences around the characterisation of Patricia Farnham. They described the anxieties of the male scriptwriters, who feared Patricia would become an antipathetic character if she was seen to put her career before her young child. Such anxieties have presumably been allayed in more recent storylines which have redirected Patricia away from her successful career and back into the home, reinforcing one of the 'post-feminist' myths that women are unable to combine work and motherhood without some savage penalty to themselves, their relationships or their offspring. The real life struggles women face in the tensions between work and personal relationships are overshadowed by representations

which are unsympathetic and narrative which is heavily traditionalist, moralistic and judgmental.

Sexuality and sexual violence

As already established, the channelling of female sexuality into motherhood appears to take precedence over other expressions of that sexuality in *Brookside*. Single women characters have frequently been portrayed negatively in *Brookside* as symptomatic of that 'dangerous' female sexuality which exists outside of the boundaries of the family. At its most extreme this took the form of Jenny Swift, the 'psycho-teacher from hell', who in a bizarre *Fatal Attraction* storyline rip-off, was romantically obsessed with 'poor' Mick Johnson to the point of his attempted murder when her love was unrequited! Bev McLoughlin and Patricia Farnham both epitomised the stereotypical predatory 'other woman' in their early characterisations. They have only become slightly more 'sympathetic' characters as their identities have become more firmly located within their respective 'reconstituted families' as wives and mothers.

The dichotomy between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' expressions of female sexuality is reinforced by women characters conforming to the 'acceptable' stereotype and being given the dialogue with which to berate other women. The vitriolic reactions to Beth Jordache's lesbianism by Bev McLoughlin and Jacqui Dixon illustrate the point, along with the incessant judgemental gossip-mongering of Julia Brogan — *Brookside's* equivalent of *Coronation Street's* Hilda Ogden or *EastEnders's* Dot Cotton.

The double standard of morality was forcefully illustrated through a recent storyline which involved Max Farnham standing trial, wrongly accused of kerb-crawling. Although Max was the focus of much neighbourhood tittle-tattle, the storyline was overwhelmingly sympathetic to Max as an 'innocent victim' of circumstances.

Inevitably issues such as this, and attempts by *Brookside* to deal sensitively with other issues such as men's physical and sexual violence, are difficult for an early evening soap and the expectations of drama-documentary analysis are sometimes too demanding. Yet it remains important that they are dealt with knowledgeably and that they challenge stereotypes. To that end there was a commitment to a storyline which did not 'blame' Sheila Grant for

the rape which she suffered. Yet during interview, Jimmy McGovern who wrote that particular script acknowledged that he 'could be accused of fulfilling every working-class male's nightmare. If you let your woman do an Open University course some slick bastard's going to be at her, so keep your woman barefoot and pregnant'.

Likewise the 'date rape' storyline involving Diana Corkhill and Peter Harrison was acknowledged for its attempt to deal with the emotional turmoil of a rape trial. However, in contrast to the Sheila Grant rape storyline, viewers had little previous sympathy for the woman character, and from the outset the question of whether she really had been raped was presented very equivocally, reinforcing a range of popularly-held prejudices about the validity of women's experiences and testimonies relating to male violence. Peter Harrison's subsequent acquittal might not of itself have been objectionable had it represented an attempt to comment on the difficulties women have in seeking justice through the law. But the whole context of the storyline and the presentation of the allegation as possibly false was broadcast at the precise time that women in real life were experiencing a backlash over their 'date rape' allegations against 'respectable' men who were known to them. Further, the 'routine' events and the 'ordinariness' of male violence can be diminished by storylines which either focus on isolated or comparatively rare examples, or attribute causation to 'deviant', 'pathological' individuals and families.

The storylines involving the Jordache family reflected this tendency. Trevor Jordache was presented as the 'sick' wife-beater of Mandy and 'perverted' sexual abuser of his daughter, Beth. The characterisations of Mandy and Beth were problematic with Mandy the stereotypical, weak, passive, 'appropriate' or inevitable victim of verbal and physical violence who failed to protect her daughter from Trevor. Eventually her 'rescue' was due to the intervention of another man — Sinbad.

Beth's character initially conveyed the genuine courage and determination of a survivor of sexual violence, but this was undermined by a storyline involving the development of her lesbian identity. Had this storyline focused on another woman character it might have been a more positive portrayal, but the choice of Beth hopelessly sabotaged the attempt by connecting

her developing sexuality to childhood damage.

The commitment to challenging male aggression and violence has been undermined by other storylines which appear to give legitimacy to the notion that a man has a right to use his physicality in order to discipline 'his' woman. The storyline around the characters of Terry and Sue Sullivan was particularly contentious. Inadvertently, Terry discovered he was not the father of Sue's child. Sue's 'betrayal' threatened Terry's sexuality especially since it coincided with the discovery of his infertility. Terry reacted violently towards Sue, throwing her and the baby out of the house. Terry's dialogue was tinged with misogynist phrases for several weeks afterwards. Strong images of hegemonic masculinity were (and have consistently been) evident in the narrative of Terry's longstanding 'mate' Barry Grant. His reaction to Sue regarding the above storyline is a striking example — 'If I were Terry, you'd be a corpse now. You're not fit to be a mother. You don't deserve Terry'. Sue Johnston recalled during interview how Brian Regan (who plays Terry) received many letters following that episode from men who applauded his violent behaviour. Eithne Browne revealed during interview how in real life both she and Annie Miles (who played Sue) had been verbally abused by men in the streets as a consequence of these storylines in which they had challenged the patriarchal authority of their husbands. Such incidents indicate the presence of a process of male bonding between the 'fantasy' of the characterisations and 'real life' men — a process which is often underplayed in terms of its significance and consequences for *all* women by those responsible for creating and presenting such images.

Race and Black women

There have been very few Black central women characters in *Brookside*. Those there have been are problematic. Josie Johnson was portrayed as the archetypal slack, Black working-class woman who did her husband, children (and gender) wrong in her preference for 'freedom' over domesticity and motherhood. In deserting the duties of marriage and motherhood she was duly 'punished' via a heavy moralistic dialogue from other characters, both men and women. The portrayal was negative and distinctly male-centred, evoking sympathy for the long-suffering and ever-patient Mick. Her punishment was



'A process of male bonding' — Masculinity, Brookside-style

institutionalised as she lost custody of the children and Mick was further rewarded with a 'new' woman, worthy of him: Marianne Dwyer. Marianne was presented as an articulate, ambitious, middle-class Black woman. The contrast in her character with that of Josie was unmistakable, yet Marianne also developed negatively as a scheming whingeing, hard-nosed and selfish woman. She dumped Mick's brother at the altar in preference for Mick — revealing her 'deceitful' nature. There followed a 'sexual harassment at work' storyline which focused mainly on Mick's angst over the situation ('is she another Josie?'; 'has she given her boss the "come-on"?'). Mick's response was stereotypically spontaneous, aggressive and confrontational. The Black working-class 'male protector' of 'his' woman was set against Marianne's cool, scheming, feminine guile, through which she eventually turned the tables on her (Black) boss. In fact her character developed as the stereotypical middle-class 'superwoman' of the 1990s, giving a distorted representation of the dynamics of male violence and power. It reinforced the idea that it is primarily the responsibility of women to put an end to harassment.

The subtext of these storylines carried clear

expressions of misogyny and racism. Should women, particularly Black women, want to compete in the 'white man's world' they should be prepared to take the consequences. It was a theme confirmed in Marianne's characterisation: could she really 'hack it' in taking tough decisions in the world of business? In this struggle she became the 'tortured', 'unhappy', 'whining', 'post-feminist' woman of the 1990s. She wanted a career, she wanted a relationship with Mick, but she rejected marriage and was consistently impatient when dealing with Mick's children. This was constructed as both selfish and deviant. Her 'punishment' was the introduction of a competitor for Mick's affections — Carol, an uncomplicated, bubbly, white, working-class Liverpool woman with no aspirations above those of her class or gender. The women were locked in a tactical struggle for Mick. Unsurprisingly, Marianne was compelled to sacrifice her successful job away from home in order to 'keep' her man. Initially, to secure the relationship, she gave up her independence and became engaged to Mick. It was only in a subsequent storyline revolving around Mick's wrongful arrest for burglary on their wedding day that a rift appears in the relationship and Marianne decides to move away and resume her professional career. The possibility of representing this positively as a really difficult decision for Marianne was overshadowed by narrative which ensured maximum sympathy for Mick. Marianne was once again cast as the villain, deserting Mick in his hour of need.

Political identity

The political identity of the women characters in *Brookside* is significantly underdeveloped. By focusing on individual women's personal relationships as wives, mothers, girlfriends, mistresses, women's economic exploitation is conveniently side-stepped, neglecting all recognition of women's potential as a powerful, political force within society. It appears that women are allowed to be narrowly 'political' only in the relatively compartmentalised and marginalised area of 'women's issues': infertility, menstruation, rape, domestic violence, housework. For example it is Eddie Banks (like Bobby Grant and Frank Rogers before him) whose storylines have involved trades union struggles. By contrast Rosie Banks's 'struggle' was her fight for an official apology and

compensation after having been subjected to an unwanted and unnecessary hysterectomy. The political legitimacy of this storyline is unquestionable as an issue of concern to women. However an opportunity to develop a powerful narrative around the medicalisation of women's physical and mental health was lost. Rather than expose the patriarchal assumptions which inform the uses (and abuses) of gynaecological theory and practice, the storyline changed tack and concentrated on Rosie's 'pathological' deterioration into a gambling 'addiction'.

Rare moments of solidarity amongst women are evident in *Brookside* as for example in the 'Free the Jordaches' campaign. Yet even this storyline failed to deliver what could have been a powerful representation of sisterhood in so far as the *Brookside* women sought to distance themselves from the other women protesters who joined them. These 'other women', visibly dressed in the instantly recognisable 'feminist uniform', were portrayed as violent trouble-makers. The message that feminist politics and action is deviant and dangerous and of no relevance to 'ordinary' women came across loud and clear. Given that 'real-life' feminists involved with Justice for Women had given so much of their time and energy to *Brookside* during the development of the Jordache storylines ensuring that the representation was as accurate and realistic as possible and giving crucial support to women viewers reflecting on their own experiences of domestic violence, the way those same feminists were subsequently represented was unsurprisingly experienced as a betrayal.

Making Brookside

An examination of the day to day working relationships on the set at *Brookside* reveals similar concerns in the area of programme production as to those in content. Eithne Browne recalled during interview,

There was a great deal of sexism against female directors. There was one comment from an actor to a Black female director — 'It's bad enough having to work with a woman, but a Black woman?!'

Also you would find that when people were being viewed by the directors and the editors upstairs in the box, comments about various parts of their bodies were not uncommon. So you're still not viewed as an equal individual, as a person who works with them, you're just somebody with big bosoms or a person that they would like to explore further given the chance. That just goes to show that there is so much more to be done so that a

woman could walk across 'Brookside Close' and they wouldn't notice her bosoms... and she could be viewed as another individual and not as a sexual object.

Two women scriptwriters for *Brookside* gave vivid accounts of their struggles to establish more positive representations of women characters in the programme. Their voices were often silenced or their suggestions ridiculed by the men in the storyline conferences. Additionally, one woman commented:

There is always a certain amount that we have no control over, which is partly to do with logistics or partly to do with one of Phil [Redmond]'s decisions and we know that.

One of the things that I think perhaps he (the producer) did make a decision over, management-wise, is that he would never try to pretend that the word from God wasn't the word from God. 'Phil says this is going to happen' he says, and we know it's going to happen, so we don't waste our time.

Eithne Browne was no less blunt: 'I think that while you've got a male at the top making those decisions and the greater number of male writers, then I can see women can't help but be coerced in some way'. The tensions and conflicts that surround the process of characterisation and representation are mirror images of the real life struggles experienced by women who work at *Brookside*.

Failing to deliver

Whether at the level of day-to-day working relationships of actors, writers, technicians, producers, directors, administrators, or in the portrayal of women characters that ultimately appear on the screen, it is evident that when put to the test of 'woman-centredness' *Brookside* fails to deliver. In many ways the programme exploits stereotypes of women; it fails to 'interrogate, explain or offer alternatives to dominant ideologies'; and it fails to be 'awash with ideas for change'! As Dee Dee Glass states:

...by appearing to 'do' women's issues...two dangerous illusions are created. The first is that there is no more to say about such subjects. The second is that, in any case, women's issues do not merit serious consideration (p 45).

Anticipating the frequently hurled accusation of reading too much into the programme (after all 'It's only a television programme; people forget and take it seriously' (Phil Redmond *New Statesman*, 1990)), I want to

make it clear that *Brookside* is and *should be* taken seriously for two reasons. First, it is impossible to represent images of women and men without dealing with relationships of power and control. As discussed earlier, all media — *Brookside* being no exception — have considerable power to rewrite, restructure and throw back at us a version of ourselves which is presented as the 'norm'. In a capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal society, white, middle-class, male action, thoughts and words represent the 'norm' and women are only defined in relation to men. *Brookside* fails to convince us of its ability and/or willingness to seriously challenge sexist ideology. While it might start with what appears to be a promising storyline, all too often it lacks the courage of its convictions and changes tack, as with Rosie's 'gambling addiction' and Beth's lesbianism. Whether this is a limitation of the soap genre, or a reflection of the contradictory attitudes about gender which prevail on *Brookside*, the effect is the same.

Second, contrary to Phil Redmond's comment above, *Brookside* purposefully sets itself apart from the rest of the soaps in *claiming* to deal with 'serious', 'real' issues of concern to women. It should not be surprised when women put its claims to the test! Any programme which claims to have a commitment to women's issues must do much more than bring such issues to our attention. It should demonstrate a commitment to showing women's strength, both individually and collectively, and women's ability to make a positive difference to their lives in spite of male oppression. *Brookside*'s commitment to 'realism' demands that women are trapped in characterisations of powerlessness, vulnerability and exploitation, unable to 'break free'. Wrapped up in its dominant masculine ideology it presents its myths as reality denying the potential for alternative, progressive discourse. Ultimately this means that the programme is unable to represent women in any radical or challenging way. Until it is prepared to take on board a truly woman-centred philosophy and practice then *Brookside* shouldn't pretend to be anything more than just another soap. □

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'Never try to pretend the word from God isn't the word from God'
 — Brookside's creator, Phil Redmond

Confronting Contradictions

Beth Ritchie is a long time Black feminist activist who has worked in the US battered women's movement. Her study of the connections between violence against women and women's imprisonment *Compelled to Crime* was published this year. She teaches at a college in New York and continues to do education and support work with women in prison. In this interview with Liz Kelly she talks about identifying as an African-American woman rather than a woman of colour, her work with Black women in prison, and the challenges this involves for feminist analysis, service provision and activism.

Liz Kelly Can we begin with you locating yourself and your work?

Beth Ritchie Well, I think of myself first and foremost as an activist — for almost twenty years now in the anti-violence movement — struggling with the issues of raising ethnicity as a compound issue of violence. Increasingly I have thought of myself as distinctively African-American; not so much the multiple ethnicities that we think of as women of colour. I have done that in part because I really do believe that violence is a different experience, and the rates may also be different [in different communities], but certainly the experiences are different. Also because I'm more and more convinced of the need for specific cultural responses. So my work is much more embedded in Black communities and Black community development politics. Being out as a lesbian in that context is very different than in other places, being out as a feminist in that context is very different from other places, but I see that as the locus of my work now.

Asking the same questions in new ways

Liz In seeking to challenge racism feminists have always said violence is not more common amongst disadvantaged groups, that the important difference was access to services. Why have you decided to look again at the prevalence issue?

Beth For very important strategic reasons we [in the battered women's movement] had to use the 'every woman' argument, and it was important to raise public consciousness. But one of the consequences has been a very flat monolithic picture of who a battered woman could be. Many Black women that I know don't fit that picture, and not only don't fit that picture in the public eye, but also don't fit that picture in terms of public policy. So things like 'battered women's syndrome' don't fit the experiences of Black women. There's clearly a range within Black women, but when we say 'all women' that has really come to mean white middle-class women. So I think we have to undo

some of the rhetoric that we used quite successfully at one time. Access to services is different, but I think it's even deeper than that. I think the meaning that violence has, the way — not the way it's physically felt, but the way it's symbolically experienced — is very different. I'm doing some research with a Black women's group, and we've done focus-group interviews with nine different sub-groups of Black women: adolescents; lesbians; senior citizens; professional women; women involved in labour unions. It's been fascinating, and in each one they feel different from other Black women, and they feel very different from white women. They talk about distinguishing things like utilisation of the police, of public institutions, but also their relationships with men who assault them is different.

Liz So are you saying that there are particular differences which change what violence means for Black women, and that these are linked to race and racism?

Beth Mostly linked, yeah. For example, there is such rhetoric in the Black community about the protection of women in a very different way than in the white community. There's a very popular T-shirt that Black men wear that says 'Respect and protect the Black woman' and it has an African symbol on it. The contradictions between that cultural concept of protection and being abused is so profound. Then there is a community-level discourse about Black women being sacred, the mules of our community, the strength of our families, which means there's less room for vulnerability, and that creates another internal contradiction for women who are then assaulted. I think that this matters deeply somehow, and I don't think that there are many white communities or white families or white women who have that contradiction. They have other contradictions, but they don't have that particular one, which has a lot to do with whether or not to reach out for help, how long to tolerate the abuse, even to name something as abusive.

At the same time, Black boys are wearing a T-shirt that says 'Shut-up Bitch'. There's also the rap music, media-driven hostility towards Black girls which creates another contradiction. Black boys talk about their mothers as sacred and then they batter Black girls who might be the mother of their children. Teasing all this apart is much more complicated, but I actually think that the level of violence that younger

Black women are facing is extraordinary, significantly greater than what women of a different generation faced as well as from women in different ethnic groups.

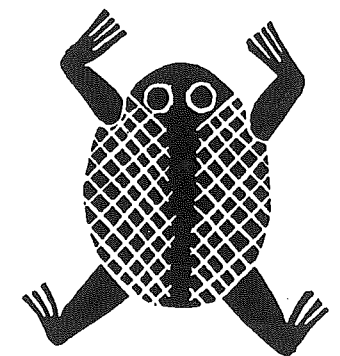
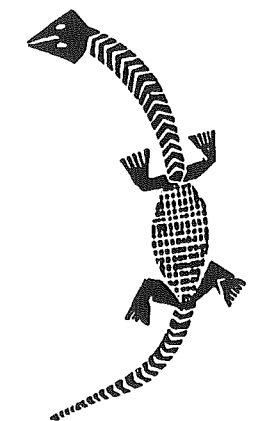
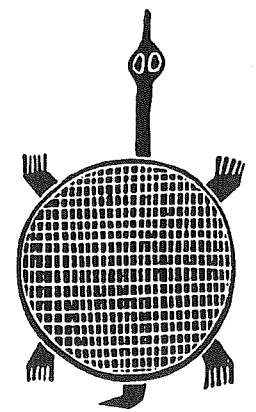
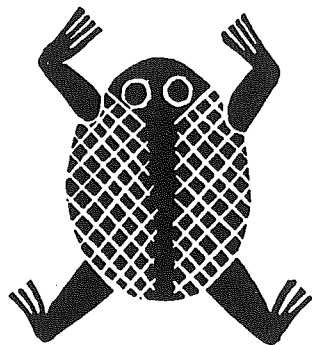
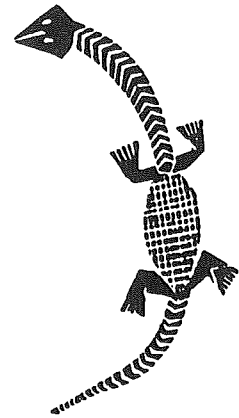
Working with women in prison

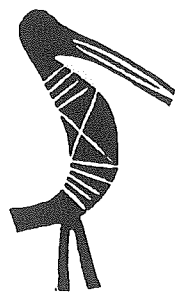
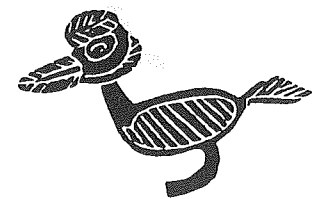
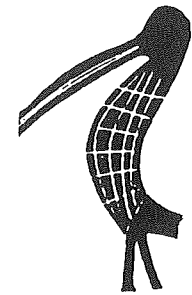
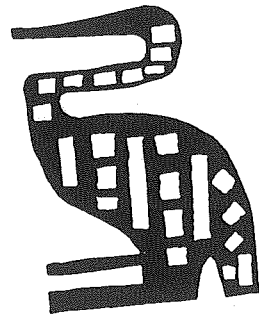
Liz Can you talk a little bit about how you began work with women in prison?

Beth There are three things that influenced this current work that I do with women in prison. One is that I was interested in Black feminist theory that would explain identity, social location and none of it addressed women in prison. There was a lot related to work and to sexuality, so I kept wondering what about women in prison as a Black feminist issue? I also became very involved in worrying mostly, and in organising around, the death penalty — being concerned about incarceration rates in general, but also the particular ways that Black people are being incarcerated as a social-service solution often. I really saw the relationship between the erosion of human services in a community and mass incarceration. And again in that discourse there was no room for a gender discussion. Then I started to meet women that I knew from my community when I was going into the jail to do HIV/AIDS education. So I needed to follow the link that had been part of their journey. It's been transforming in terms of how I understand race and gender politics and class. It's another part of the rhetoric 'It can happen to all women'. Battering happens so differently to women who are incarcerated — not the physical assaults, but the negotiation of one's own autonomy, whether it's to seek safety or to stay safely. I began thinking we'd done a disservice to low-income women by not treating class as a distinguishing area.

Liz Tell us a little more about what you mean?

Beth Well, again for Black women class has a different meaning — most poor Black women have not depended on men in traditional ways for economic support, and yet the emotional or inter-personal dimensions of their relationship might be very — hegemonic is the word I use. Many of the women who I meet in prison have very idealised notions of relationships with Black men. Their economic work and their emotional work to restabilise Black men is in part to endure their abuse, so that the abuse becomes a way to, not equalise, but privilege men in order to meet this ideological standard of gender relationships. When women and men are





deeply interested in that, there are few other things that Black men can do to achieve that except beat Black women, and women think of it in this way. So that has to do with race and class, as closely as gender, not as 'add-ons' but really deeply intersected within one person's experience.

Liz Does this connect to simplistic ways of thinking about 'empowerment' because many of the ways I see it used these days is as some form of personal power belonging to the individual which they are entitled to use to benefit themselves, and the fact that this may involve 'power over' someone else has become invisible.

Beth Right, that's the problem. I think about empowerment a little bit differently than most people; to me empowerment is related to critical analysis of one's own experience and self-reflection. To me it's a deepening understanding of situational barriers, to see how those are functional for other people than oneself. That isn't often what people mean by 'empowerment' — regrettably, most ideas about it are very individual-focused and not analytical.

New perspectives

Liz Can you talk a little more about the work with women in prison and how it has changed your understanding of violence against women?

Beth There is something about the actual geography of doing work in prisons — *every time* I leave I am aware I can choose what I have for dinner that night. And I really think about it every day. I always felt respectful of the privilege of safety that I had, but I understand it in *such a different way* now. So I have this sense of deep obligation, I work so much harder, I feel constantly compelled to do work on behalf of women who are incarcerated. So my life has changed in that I do more work! And I do it urgently, it's almost — 'fear' isn't the right word — at the same time that I leave knowing I have the privilege, I also know how fragile that is. It has become a deeply personal work, because I've been close enough myself, so I have this urgency about saving my own life in a very profound way. I have this identification with the women who are in prison, like no other categorical group that I have ever worked with. That's partly because they don't represent categorical work, they represent every woman who tries to figure out how to make sense out of a situation that doesn't make sense. I often feel

any of us are that close (snaps fingers) to being locked up. It's like, this is what's illegal now; at any moment anything can be illegal. It's a terrifying potential, how we administer justice. There have been a few times when I've been in the jail and I've lost my ID or something and I've had to talk my way out, and a few other times I've been detained in customs and I've tried to describe what I do to negotiate my way out of these points of detention; I realise how even with *all* the privilege that I have, these systems suck you in and you cannot get out. Arbitrary authority is used, isolation is used, demeaning of people is used — it's exactly what happens in a battering situation. This whole system is actually terrifying to me. So I feel this urgency to work in my life to change that.

Part of it too is that I work a lot with this sense of people having to make choices about bad options. I am aware of that in my own life, but it is very strong for women in prison; you're arrested for something you did but there's a whole lot of other things that you could have been arrested for, and what you were arrested for might not be something that you did, but there were a lot of other things that you could have been arrested for. And I work with that a lot about my own life — if it had been a different time, if I were a different person, if I had been caught I would be there too. Whilst I do not underestimate the class privilege that I would have, I have also met *so many* people whose class did not protect them.

Liz : In your new book *Compelled to Crime* you talk about how many of the women you work with in prison have experienced male violence, and that this links in various ways to the reasons they are in prison.

Beth : They embody all of the complexities and failures of our society. They represent public policy failure, they represent fear — the world is afraid of them, as poor Black women. I don't understand what the fear comes from, but the fear and hatred of them is there. They've been failed, they've been betrayed over and over again in the public as well as the private sphere of their lives. I think the battered women's movement has furthered that. I think our attempts at clemency have said that it takes a better battered woman to deserve our efforts to get her out of prison. Most of the women that I work with aren't there for assaulting their partner; they're there for drugs, prostitution, assaulting some other man, failing to protect

their kids. I understand in some way why this has happened, but we have so de-contextualised violence from other issues that I think *we* as advocates have really betrayed the women who have experienced violence and are incarcerated because of it, but don't fit in whatever legal or policy area we're working to change. And in that way it reminds of when I first started my work in the battered women's movement when I used to have to go over and over again, to convince people that racism was an issue, and people would say 'yes, but...'. It is almost like I'm back there saying 'we have missed the boat'. Why are we continuing to refuse to take on this issue, there are *thousands* more battered women in jails and prisons than we recognise. They've ended up there because we have not found any other place for them to go, and we're not organising to get them out!

Liz . In many ways to get where we have we concentrated on stressing women's strength and survival, and rejected the term 'victim' in the process. In doing so I think we lost a way of understanding the many different ways in which women are harmed, the damage that violence does, that women find ways to resist that we don't understand or recognise, and I wonder if in abandoning that term we have also abandoned women who don't fit the 'survivor' category?

Beth They don't exist, that's right. There's a way that, for good reasons, and through very hard work, we did create this and it's very hard to uncreate something that we worked hard for. I don't think what we did was malicious, but our imagination has failed us, we need to de-construct now, to take a different road. It means to me that in a lot of ways the anti-violence movement is no longer radical. Because radical politics would have us there working with women in prison. It's almost like there is no other symbolic, metaphorical place, let alone any agency or institution, where women are so detained, so powerless, so abused... and we've sort of said we can't do that hard work. A very concrete example of it is how we have *still* failed to open our shelter [refuge] doors to women who are using drugs and alcohol, and so they end up in prison instead of in shelters. I know that addiction is complex, that drugs impair judgement, that alcoholism is tricky, but are we saying we're only going to work with the easier ones? What does that mean? It's about the kind of risk we take as a social change movement, whether we locate ourselves in sites of

struggle or whether we create this infrastructure of services that requires that we keep our shelter beds full but not full beyond the capacity that we are licensed for. There's this way we do a dance with people who are fundamentally our enemies. Again it really does take me back to why I started this work, there's such a hypocrisy in some ways. It's very hard to be critical of the women's movement as someone who's been a part of it — better me than someone else maybe — but there's this sense that the whole thing is still fragile enough that all it takes is one peg to be pulled and the whole thing can come tumbling down. And how are we to give honour to the women who've saved lives over a long time, but also to be self-critical and say 'Now we need to find our way back to other sites'.

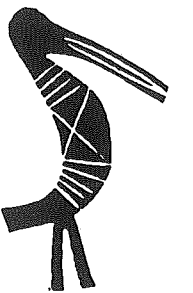
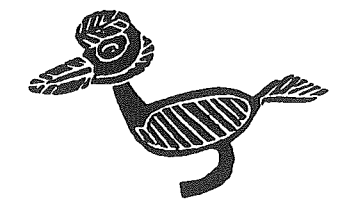
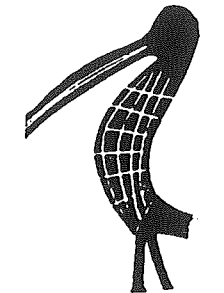
Challenging feminist orthodoxy

Liz For me it's about remembering our original vision. My story linked to this is about how when a woman came to a refuge it was about the danger she was in, and providing safety. But now I hear stories about women being asked to leave because a violent man knows she is there, so she's endangering everybody's safety. And I want to say 'wait a minute'!

Beth Right, there's something fundamentally wrong with that!

Liz I thought the whole idea was that we would create somewhere that she didn't have to run from, that together we would stand and say 'no, no more running', that we removed men's permission to terrorise women. So there is backtracking even from that simple basic level.

Beth That's right, that's absolutely true, that it is a loss of our original vision. Part of what is really hard and frustrating is that sometimes the vision is still articulated but the practice has departed from it, so it's difficult to find the place then to enter into a critique. It's easier to critique those who do this work with a different vision. But, you know the other thing that I've learned is that vision really is only practice and that there's a way of talking about vision that has almost kept us from reality. One of the things I struggle with in my work with incarcerated women is — many of the Black women I talk to who are in jail really want men arrested, they want criminal justice intervention, they want better police, not no police, they want longer sentences. I want to listen to that, yet the more time I spend in jail the more I think 'This is the worst place for any violent person to go —



unless they want to learn more violence'. They learn strategies for violence, but they also learn about the use of arbitrary authority, isolation, how profoundly well it works — because it worked on them. So I'm left with what is the vision then? What is the underlying principle, because the strategy has to come from something.

I was really challenged by the OJ case because I really do believe in defendants' rights. And then a member of my family was almost killed three months ago by her batterer, and I found myself calling her legal advocate 'I want the State Attorney's phone number because I don't want this man to be given bail'. That's me and my family and I'm saying lock him up and throw away the key! I thought he should never leave those doors because he is trying to kill her, and he will try to kill her for as long as he can walk this earth. And then, you know, I lobby for reduced sentencing!

Liz These are the contradictions we live with aren't they? In some circumstances around certain crimes I am prepared to listen to the abolitionist case about prison. But for other crimes, where deliberate damage is done to another person, and a sense of ownership and entitlement is involved, I think the opposite, because in the absence of knowing how to create fundamental change that at least offers protection.

Beth Right. But then how do we develop policy that fits a complex rhetoric? Part of why I pose that question is that this links to my working more closely with the Black community, because I don't think we can develop national, or even state-wide policy that takes nuance and circumstances into account. Our community has to say: 'We will not tolerate intentional violence directed toward another person that's based on proprietary ownership and entitlement to abuse' and likewise we will not incarcerate people with the mental health and public health problem of addiction. That shift has to happen in my own community before I can ever expect, really, that there will be public policy that can factor in all of the different nuances and the competing priorities, competing interests that every group has. This is hard, because I don't think that we should let government off the hook. But, part of what we have done is really turned too much to government to solve this problem. That's why we are in this trouble that we're in with mandatory arrest. We've expected that law

enforcement will solve this problem — and one of the results is that more women are in jail.

One of the ways that we've almost reified 'violence against women' — thinking about it as a crime and therefore using the apparatus of the criminal justice system to respond — has meant that we have created intervention, public policy, also public sentiment about police enforcement as a response to violence. So when the general public says 'Why don't women call the police?' it is without a consciousness of the tension, the hostility between Black communities and the police enforcement. We also don't factor in how Black women are deeply concerned about Black men going to prison. Let alone the fact that we don't have that police response, so it's not a real option anyway. Again I think it's an example of how we've just taken too narrow a view, and not looked enough at context with the solutions that we've tried to come up with. Having said that I do know that many Black women want men to go to jail and stay there, so this is a complicated issue. More and more I think that the answers that make sense to me, may not make sense to someone who stands in a different position.

If we look at national policy, like the recent US Violence Against Women Act, that Act is problematic in so many ways as it affects immigrant women, for example. Yet we have got so committed to passing national legislation that we don't pay attention to the details. So it becomes a necessary expense to write off the rights of immigrant women toward this greater good of passing the Violence Against Women Act. Again it points to that inconsistency between our values, principles and the reality. And the ways that we've gotten involved in these big systems is just unbelievable.

Liz We have also lost sight of where most women get their support from. They get it from their sisters, from friends, from kids, from neighbours, or they don't get it from them. But if they do it makes a significant difference. The focus on government means we haven't looked that much at how we enable those close to women to be more effective.

Beth That's right, and I've actually been inspired by the ways that now there are national campaigns to create community intolerance for violence... both the Zero Tolerance initiative, but also the Family Violence Prevention Fund in the US. But I also think that there's still a sense of some monolithic community; that one

message that's supposed to be for everybody. I just don't know how well that works. So again the well-intended efforts to make things work on a national level — whether it's to draft legislation or create community intolerance doesn't work without community-specific messages and interventions. The movement came up with that idea years ago but we're not the ones who design a national message to suit our community and assume that it would apply to everyone — but that is what is happening with those national campaigns. In the Black community right now in major urban areas like New York there is a tension in terms of relating to the Youth Firearms Prevention folks who have a very radical race analysis — typically — but no analysis of gender whatsoever. And so that's a community ally that we're trying to influence, in a way that we're not working with the white mainstream of the battered womens' movement, but that's OK, I think maybe it's a more appropriate alliance anyway.

Misuse of powerlessness

Liz I was really interested in how you used the concept of misuse of powerlessness between those who share oppressions.

Beth Caitlin Fulward, who was one of the first chairs of the Women of Colour Taskforce in the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, like many of those early activist veterans has gone on to do other work; she's worked a lot with HIV/AIDS and developed one of the largest People of Colour Against AIDS networks in the United States. It's from there that she began to think really critically about: how is it that we use a critical understanding of our oppression? Do we use it to shift consciousness and become activists and allies or do we use it to disguise or excuse away our own lack of taking responsibility for our stuff? This is a hard one to talk about publicly — it's different than internalised racism, and internalised racism is a problematic concept in some ways, because it does imply some psychological conceptualisation of internalisation. This more says that we understand powerlessness or we understand oppression and what we *choose* to do with it is not in our own best interests or in the interests of people who are similarly oppressed as we are. I think it's a great concept because it implies that we can make a different choice and without going through some psychological process of exorcising our internal angst. And I think it also

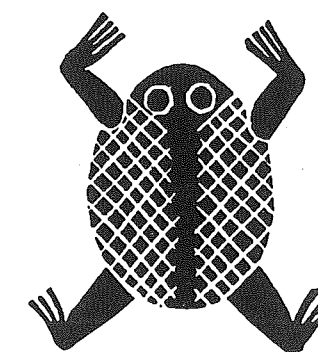
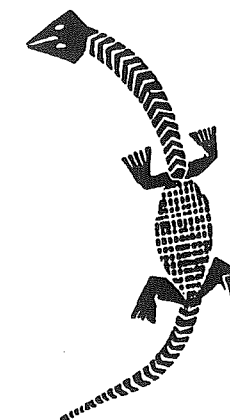
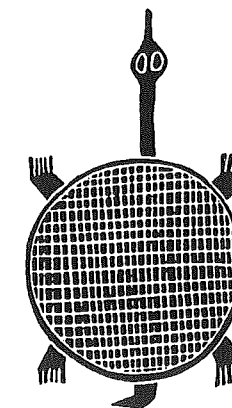
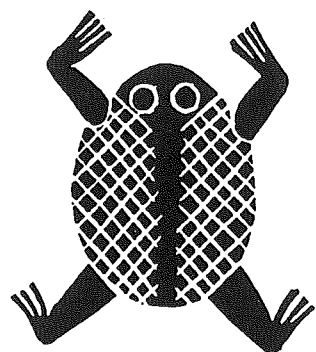
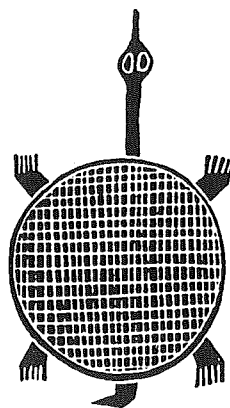
sheds light on the ways that powerlessness really fucks with people, that people get backed into corners that they don't know how to get out of, and one of the ways they do that is come out on the wrong side sometimes.

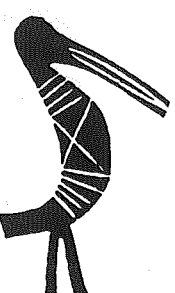
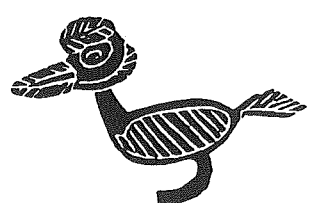
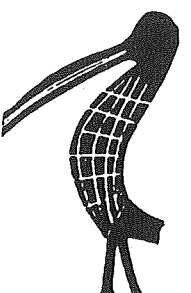
Liz I think of it in connection to the necessity of creating positive senses of identity in the context of external negative definitions, but in the process forgetting that oppression doesn't necessarily make anyone a nice person.

Beth That's right, or a sympathetic person, or one who's politically clear, it gives room for that range of responses to that trauma, if you will.

Liz The other thing you made me think about was the idea of agency which there is so much emphasis on now in feminist theory, but agency seems to only mean that we have to choose to act, there is very little recognition of the vastly different contexts in which women are able to act.

Beth One of the ways that it gets played out is the victim survivor/ offender defendant set of categories that we've set up for women to try to fit into. From working with women in prison it's very clear to me that women make choices — but they don't have good options and they don't have free will; clearly they don't have free will, but they're not passive recipients or only vessels of despair. And they integrate that, sort it out and then choose a path that they think they can actually go on. So they exercise agency, they're not without some kind of self-determination. Sometimes they intentionally commit crimes, in response to being battered. The problem is that we don't have systems that allow you to be two things — a victim and an offender — so instead we've asked women to only be one thing, and relate to agency in only in one way. Our interventions are so categorical, overly determined, that we can't accommodate a lot of women's realities. So we either say women are offenders and therefore need these services or women are victims and they need these services without seeing that probably most are both. When you follow that to a logical extreme, in the case, I think of young Black men who are perpetrators — they are also victims. Increasingly we know this. And that means that our whole fundamental analysis has to be shaken up, because do we then say 'Well, the victimisation of women is more important than the victimisation of boys when they are children'? Do we want to fit men as victims into our analysis? Quite frankly I don't, but it is a logical





extension if we take this argument all the way. That sort of brings me to something that I've been thinking about in terms of what kind of analysis we use to base our intervention on. And I'm less convinced that we need an analysis that is totally consistent, or that has sort of multi-level integrity. In other words, I think that we need to think of women as perpetrators and victims, as offenders and survivors, but I don't think that means that we have to offer services to men just because they can be both of those things too.

Liz And we defend that as a political choice rather than in terms of theoretical consistency?
Beth Yes, indeed. It's so interesting now having an identity as an academic, I really do think of myself as a methodologist and I'm very interested in theory. But that's not why I do this work, you know. I think that as more and more of us are positioned to contribute to scholarship and influence the literature we have to also be clear when we're doing political work. Not that academic work is not political work but it's really very different, the arguments I would make for theoretical consistency I would not make for political choices.

Working with complexity

Liz All the way through this conversation you've been talking about how feminists need to be able to deal with complexity, but also how complicated that can be. Your response to the Million Man March [Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, called in early 1996 for a million Black men to march on Washington, to make a statement about Black masculinity in terms of responsibility to their families] — was an interesting example of this.

Beth Well I was sitting in Chicago, immersed in the politics of Black community development, trying to influence that work to have a gender analysis, aligning with men that I never thought I'd ever align with. The Million Man March almost came along to say 'see Beth — this is why you can't do it.' And 'This is why you can't do it' meant: how do you offer constant critique of black patriarchy that demonstrates understanding of the plight of Black men in contemporary society as different but not necessarily worse than the situation facing Black women. How do you articulate all of this? Do you stand, as a raced woman, on the side of these men trying to do something? Or do you risk feeding the white feminist, and progressive white

critique of the march — are you used as an agent of theirs, because they all would love to say 'Oh, there's some Black women who don't agree'. Where do you find yourself? Initially, like many other women, I was silent, I just could not figure out a way in to this debate. Then I found more women who thought like I did, there were Black feminists who spoke out publicly, and surrounding them was a whole group of women who said 'I'm not going to be forced into this corner, I will not choose between a gender analysis and feeling like I'm part of a black community'. I don't think we did it that successfully — we got some press, and some sense that we were not totally weird. But we did not touch women in the same way that the Million Man March did. It really called us together — we still meet and talk about this; part of what we didn't do is have accessible material and accessible arguments that have strongly articulated ideology. Louis Farrakhan had pamphlets that were attractive, that were easily accessible, that reflected people's experience; deeply steeped in ideology of the Nation of Islam. We don't have that deeply steeped in Black feminism, and we need to do that; our popular education has not been up to par, and to me that was popular education at its best, it was brilliant organising, national organising. We could only respond and our white feminist sisters and the progressive group of men behind them tried to exploit us, tried to get us to join their gender critique.

Some of our best Black men who were feminist allies joined the Million Man March. It emotionally and politically shook us up to a point where we said 'We have to do something'. Which is why we're still meeting to try and figure out how to do popular education, on this issue. In that sense I sort of feel grateful. I also really remember that day, it was such an awful day for me. And I remember thinking the best I can hope is that some battered women are safer because their husbands or partners went to that march, and I thought that maybe some of them will pay their child support when they get home, and maybe there'll be a chance for women-only space, for productive discussions for women. I kept trying to find these glimpses of hope. I talked with men who I think were really changed by it, that made it more complicated. It did enough good that I'd say it wasn't all bad. I wish I could say it was terrible, it was all bad — but it wasn't. The way the white media res-

ponded to it was so overtly racist that the racial dimension of it just jumped forward. I've often thought since if it was now and I knew what it was going to be like, would I go and protest? I still wouldn't but I would still try and articulate how wrong it was. They're planning a Million Family March in October which to me is just as troubling, just as problematic because their notion of 'family' is so — I'd rather it just be men in some ways because then the critique is more apparent, than hidden under the ideology of family; because it's really patriarchy.
Liz And women are only there as part of 'family', they're not allowed to be there as women.

Beth That's right.

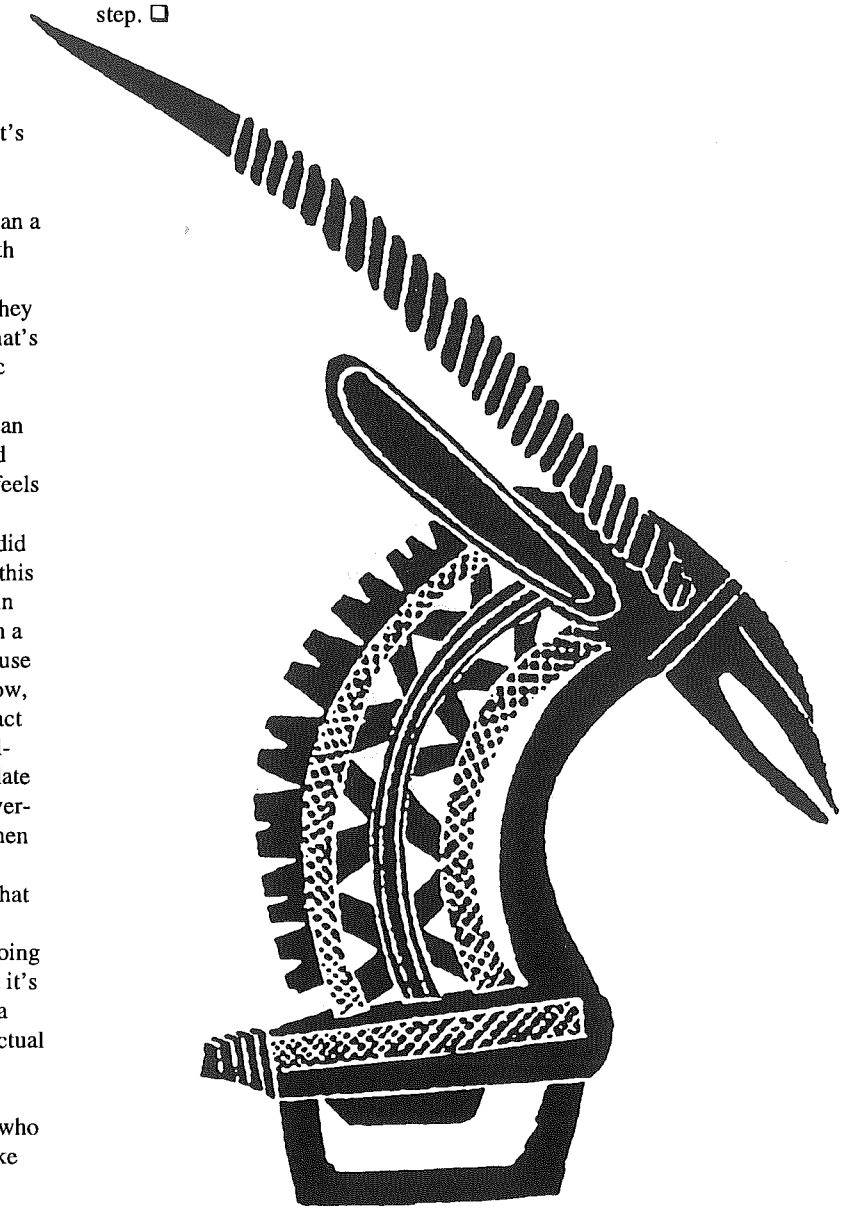
Liz How do you see Black feminism in the United States, where it's got to and where it's going?

Beth I see a parallel between my evolving consciousness as a Black feminist, rather than a woman of colour, and what's happening with Black feminism. Even in terms of where intellectual opportunities are created now, they are much more culturally specific. I think that's a good thing, journals look more for specific articles, conferences focus much more on specific groups. It's actually widened who can be a Black feminist, because it's not melded with so many other issues — I love that. It feels to me a place where I really can be all my identities. The 'woman of colour' category did offer more opportunity for blending, whilst this is much more specific but really about me, in some ways very self-interested but also with a sharpness to it. I've changed how I am because of how Black feminism has continued to grow, evolve, clarify, define, shape its way. The fact that there's some very well-established well-respected Black feminists who really articulate theoretical issues helps. I was having a conversation with Barbara Smith recently, of Kitchen Table Press, and I was saying 'Barbara, where's Kitchen Press? What happened to that major institution that just changed women's lives?' And she explained where it is, it's doing alright; it's going to publish again soon, but it's without its edge. Black feminism was such a popular movement, as opposed to an intellectual movement, and it feels in some ways more intellectual now than popular and that's troubling to me. There are so many women who remembered reading *Home Girls* and felt like life opened up for them. Very different to

reading *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins's book, some people had their world open up, but it was not popular. I hope there's a way to make it popular again. It's similar to the Million Man March — how do we make sure that those of us who get really excited about theory have that, and how do we make sure that people who don't get so excited about that have something else to get excited about? Black feminism can transcend the boundaries between intellectual life and real life, community life much more easily than other things. We've yet to do it very well, but it's got to be our next step. □

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Taking Liberties

The time is long gone when feminism and gay politics might have been assumed to share a common analysis of heterosexuality. Gay activists, civil rights lawyers and the gay press seem united in their determination to measure gay (male) rights against a heterosexual norm. A recent report by Liberty illustrates this only too well. Not only does it exclude a lesbian feminist perspective, argues Stevi Jackson, it is dangerous, self-defeating and deeply reactionary.

Back in the early 1970s, the term 'sexual politics' was used as an umbrella term covering both feminist and gay politics. For a brief period, radical gay activists allied themselves with the women's movement, believing that gay liberation, like women's liberation, required the dismantling of patriarchal structures and institutions. This alliance, however, proved short lived. Today large sections of the male dominated gay movement are pursuing goals which are antithetical to feminism — and also counter-productive for gay liberation. This can be illustrated by a report published by Liberty (formerly the National Council for Civil Liberties) in 1994: *Sexuality and the State: Human Rights Violations Against Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered People*.

While produced by a civil rights organisation, the report was compiled in consultation with Stonewall and OutRage, representing respectively the reformist and radical faces of gay politics in Britain. The arguments it presents reflect those widely aired by gay activists and most of the evidence cited in support of these arguments comes from the gay

press. The report can, therefore, be taken as representative of male dominated gay politics. It is certainly not representative of lesbian politics.

While claiming to speak for both lesbians and gays, the Liberty report is primarily a defence of the rights of gay men. There are women in both OutRage and Stonewall, but the agenda of these organisations is defined from a gay male perspective and this, unsurprisingly, is reflected in the report. Lesbian feminist perspectives are totally excluded. Among all the references to the gay press there are none to feminist publications and there appears to have been no consultation with feminist organisations, such as Rights of Women, which have campaigned around the legal rights of lesbians.

Endorsing heterosexuality

The lack of any engagement with feminism not only illustrates the distance between gay male politics and feminist politics, but also leads to some of the fundamental flaws in the arguments Liberty presents. Because the report ignores decades of feminist activism and scholarship on sexuality (as well as the work of more radical

gay theorists) it reads as if no-one had ever developed critical perspectives on the social construction of gender and sexuality. In particular, it fails to address the ways in which institutionalised heterosexuality reinforces both patriarchal domination and the oppression of lesbians and gays.

Any attempt to further gay rights should recognise that lesbianism and homosexuality exist in opposition to heterosexuality. In the first place, the categories 'homosexual' and 'lesbian' serve to police the boundaries of institutionalised heterosexuality: homosexuals and lesbians are defined as deviant outsiders in order to confirm the 'normality' of heterosexuality. This is central to the oppression of lesbians and gays. Second, in mobilising around these identities, redefining them as political rather than deviant, lesbians and gays potentially challenge the institutionalisation of heterosexuality. Lesbianism in particular been adopted as a political stance in opposition to the appropriation of women within patriarchal societies.

The Liberty report does not recognise the oppositional location of lesbians and gays. Hence it fails to question the structures and ideologies which maintain the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and which confirm the former as the norm. Nor does it take any critical stance on heterosexuality itself. It considers neither the power relations which exist within heterosexual relationships nor the power relations which operate between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Instead heterosexuality's normative status is confirmed. It is taken as the standard on which human rights are founded, and hence the issue of rights is posed in terms of equality with heterosexuals, leaving heterosexuality itself unchallenged.

The Liberty report aims to expose the ways in which the British state denies the rights of lesbians and gays. The argument is framed in terms of internationally agreed standards for human rights, such as the United Nations (UN) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It is partly because it takes the terms of such international agreements, themselves formulated on the assumption of a universal heterosexual normality, that the report is problematic. I have no quarrel with the aim of defending civil liberties for lesbians and gay men, but this aim is not furthered by a perspective which treats heterosexuality as the standard

for human rights and which does not consider the political consequences of endorsing patriarchal, heterosexual institutions.



'Nature' vs. choice: a false opposition

One of the grounds on which Liberty argues that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is an abuse of human rights is that 'sexual orientation is an immutable part of every person like their race or gender' (p. 11). In the very next paragraph, however, it is stated that: 'A debate continues about whether sexual orientation is a biologically innate characteristic



or a conscious political choice'.

You cannot have it both ways! If sexual orientation is biological in origin it cannot be a matter of choice. Liberty wants to have it both ways because each of these options can be used to argue for protection against discrimination: 'either similar protection to that which is afforded women and ethnic minorities, or protection from discrimination because of political or other opinions' (1994: 11). This either-or distinction between biology and choice is not confined to this document: it has been a feature of other recent debates and campaigns, such as those around Section 28 and the homosexual age of consent. It relies, as Lynda Birke argues, on a reductionist view of biology as a single, simple explanation for complex human behaviour. More importantly, it leaves no room at all for social structures and processes. In ruling out the third alternative, that sexuality is socially or culturally constructed, it

ignores the social contexts which shape both biological research and the choices we make. In addition to these problems, I am not convinced that either alternative — biology or choice — provides a sound basis for advocating equality.

It is not clear whether the idea of sexuality as a choice is a misunderstanding of social constructionist theories of sexuality or of political lesbianism or both. If the idea of choice derives from political lesbianism it is a somewhat naive interpretation of it; the slogan may have been that 'any woman can' be a lesbian but, in fact, not every woman could. Lesbian feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich had a great deal to say about the material and ideological constraints involved in the maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality. Those who became lesbian for political reasons did so as a result of a particular analysis of sexuality, one which derived from the women's movement: that sexuality was socially constructed within heterosexually ordered patriarchal relations. It was in this context that the possibility of challenging and transforming sexuality opened up, making new choices available. Moreover, although the idea of choice has been important to feminist thinking on sexuality, feminists have also long been aware of the complexity of sexuality and the dangers of a liberal individualistic model of desire and identity (see Jackie Stacey's article 'Promoting normality').

Locating oneself as lesbian or gay is potentially political, because it entails embracing an identity oppositional to the prevailing norm: it is precisely the social significance of homosexuality and lesbianism that creates this political potential. Following the logic of homosexuality as a choice, Liberty argues for gay rights as analogous to the rights of political belief and dissent. What they do not consider is what gays and lesbians are dissenting from if not compulsory heterosexuality. The one thing which a politically motivated lesbian or homosexual does not want is to be just like a heterosexual, yet the aim of the report is precisely that lesbians and gays should be treated just like heterosexuals. They should, it is argued, have the right to form heterosexual style marriages including entitlements to the pensions and tax allowances which derive from the economic inequality underpinning heterosexual marriage. The goal is to be included into heterosexual privilege rather than to challenge it. Political lesbianism, on the other hand, has

always been seen as a challenge to institution-alised heterosexuality, a refusal to live within its boundaries.

Even in the absence of such a radical analysis, what freedoms could a posited right to a dissident sexuality guarantee? The right to believe and articulate a political defence of homosexuality or lesbianism is not equivalent to the right to freedom of sexual conduct. There is not, nor can there be, absolute freedom of action for any of us. Liberty's claim that the ICCPR 'protects the right of people to enter into relationships' (Liberty 1994: 11) is, to say the least, rather vague. None of us is free to enter into any form of relationship we choose, nor should we be. Many feminists would balk at the extreme libertarianism which such an argument could lead to. We would not, for example, support the right of an adult man to enter into a sexual relationship with a six year old child. Indeed feminism directly challenges some existing relationship rights, particularly the rights over women which men gain through marriage.

The return of biological determinism

The alternative strategy offered by Liberty is the claim to rights premised on sexuality as a biologically ordained immutable characteristic. Their assumption that immutable sexual nature is the only alternative to political choice is not an isolated instance, but part of a more general turn to biological explanations among gay activists. In the absence of a political understanding of sexuality as socially constructed, the idea of being 'born that way' has become attractive to many gays and some lesbians. The cultural legitimacy of 'science' provides individuals with an easily understandable way of accounting for their own sexual desires and practices. Biological explanations 'ring true' not because they are based on incontrovertible fact, but because they provide culturally approved ways of making sense of sexuality.

A further reason for the popularity of biological determinism among gay activists is that the political Right sometimes use a version of social constructionism against lesbians and gays, suggesting that it is possible to 'promote' homosexuality or convert people to it. This however, is no reason to abandon social and cultural perspectives. If both choice and determinism can be used to defend gay and lesbian rights, they can equally be deployed



against those rights — to damn lesbians and gays as genetic freaks on the one hand or moral degenerates on the other.

More importantly, countering the Right's homophobia by resorting to biological determinism concedes political ground to them. Feminists have long been aware of that homosexuality — and more specifically lesbianism — does represent a threat to institutionalised heterosexuality and to the hierarchy of gender which is integral to it. It has always been a central tenet of feminism that sexuality is socially constructed and that we can therefore struggle politically to change it. The existence of such a threat, the potential for political change, depends on recognising that the current ordering of gender and sexuality is social rather than natural.

The notion of an innate sexual orientation offers no challenge to hierarchies of gender and sexuality. This is precisely why biological

theories appeal to the less radical wing of the gay rights movement — they render homosexuality unthreatening. If gays are 'born that way', then there is no risk of their ranks being swelled by converted heterosexuals, no challenge to the hegemony of the heterosexual social



order. Indeed this is the political stance taken by Simon LeVay, the originator of the 'gay brain' theory.

This position also ignores the continued vitality of lesbian and gay communities, which have managed to reproduce themselves non-biologically. As Sarah Franklin argues:

There is a distinct political significance to the simple fact that we do not reproduce ourselves biologically. We reproduce ourselves socially, entirely by means of the social, political and cultural struggles that keep lesbian and gay sub-cultures alive. According to every theory of evolution, biological determinism or genetic essentialism we should be extinct. But we are not extinct. (p. 38).

The implications of biological and genetic theories, that they suggest that lesbians and gays, if not extinct, should be a dying breed, seems to have been missed by those gay activists who endorse such theories. They also ignore the central issue raised by Franklin, the political importance of the social reproduction of lesbian and gay communities. Instead they assume that lesbians and gays constitute a permanent, more or less stable, natural minority. To campaign for equal rights on this basis is misguided. The hope behind this, as voiced by the American gay



activist Randy Shilts, is that being gay could have no more significance than being left-handed, that it will therefore cease to be regarded as socially intolerable. Pleas for rights on this basis — we deserve tolerance and protection because we can't help it — hardly seem a promising start for claims to equality.

Such aspirations are founded on a misunderstanding of why homosexuality is socially significant, or why it exists as a meaningful social category at all. Homosexuality is not a natural difference that has become stigmatised through some irrational prejudice, but a category which only exists in relation to normative heterosexuality. It cannot be equal to heterosexuality: it is necessarily in opposition to it. Homosexuality will inevitably be regulated, oppressed and stigmatised while heterosexuality retains its privileged position as the unquestioned, institutionalised cultural norm. Nowhere in the report is this privilege challenged.

The politics of gender and sexuality

It is somewhat ironic that the Liberty report takes the immutability of sexual orientations as analogous to gender (p 11), given that the concept of gender has been used by feminists in order to refute the idea that sex differences are natural and unchanging. It also leads to further contradictions. Gender, we are told, is fixed and immutable — but because Liberty want to defend 'transgendered' individuals they complain that 'the law does not recognise the right of people to have changes to their gender acknowledged' (p. 58). The argument runs like this: gender can't change but the law should recognise our right to change it! They do not see that the very existence of gender divisions might be part of the problem and that this is linked to the division between hetero- and homo-sexuality.

Heterosexuality as a system depends upon gender hierarchy and patriarchal domination. Heterosexuality as a sexual practice is legitimated as the 'natural' outcome of equally 'natural' sex differences. Hence anatomical sex, gender and sexuality are conflated: to have female genitals is to be a woman; to be a woman is to desire men (and vice-versa). At the core of heterosexuality is gendering of desire — the idea that we should be attracted to 'the opposite sex'. Because homosexuality involves the 'wrong' choice of sexual partner, it has often been seen as a gender disorder. Some recent

forms of biological determinism promoted by gay scientists and activists accept this. For example, Simon LeVay's (1991) 'gay brain' theory relies on the idea that the brains of gay men are characteristically feminised, and thus assumes that if men desire other men they must be 'like' women. Thus patriarchal and heterosexist ideology which identifies gay men as failed men — and lesbians as failed women — is left intact.

The policing of gender divisions and of heterosexuality are intimately interconnected. It is this which the author of the Liberty report fails to appreciate. He also has not noticed that heterosexuality is necessarily a gendered institution: a man plus a woman equals a heterosexual relationship. Heterosexuals are not a genderless category. Moreover, men and women do not share equally in heterosexual privilege since heterosexual marriage has historically institutionalised women's subordination to their husbands. It is a nonsense to claim equality with heterosexuals when the condition of being heterosexual, by definition, differs for women and men.

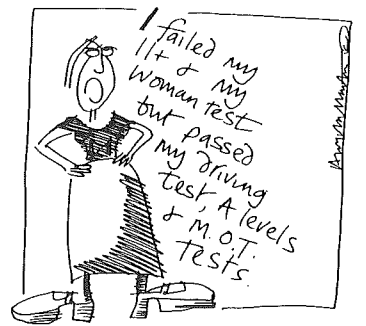
Pretended families?

Major problems arise when Liberty demands rights in areas which are central to the institutionalisation of heterosexuality, notably 'the right to form a family' (pp 18; 37-44). The well-worn example of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 demonstrates that the family, by definition, is heterosexual: gays and lesbians can only have 'pretended family relationships'. This, however, only served to underline what was already the case. However diverse family forms are becoming, a variety of state social policies reinforce the institutionalised heterosexuality and male dominance on which families are still founded. Why would lesbians and gays want to be included into an institution which has served to perpetuate heterosexuality and patriarchy? Liberty mobilises the idea of family diversity to argue that the ICCPR's provision on family rights could be extended to lesbians and gays, but the rights they argue for do not rely at all on ideas about diversity, but rather on the closest possible mimicry of conventional heterosexual domesticity. Rather than looking for ways of enhancing diversity, Liberty simply want to give lesbians and gays rights modelled precisely on the heterosexual family. It would seem that Liberty

is indeed advocating rights enabling lesbians and gays to establish 'pretended (heterosexual) family relationships'.

Demands for the recognition of gay marriage are now, of course, widely heard throughout the Western world. Liberty's call for legal recognition of same-sex relationships includes the 'benefits' accruing to heterosexual couples, such as wives' pension rights and the 'married man's tax allowance'(sic) (p. 37). The report's author seems curiously oblivious of the implications of this. Taxation and social security provisions have evolved in the context of a hierarchical system in which husbands are economic heads of households and wives are their dependants. Again we might ask why lesbians and gays should want to replicate the patterns of support and dependency which have typified patriarchal marriage.

The right to parent is potentially of a different order from the right to marriage, in that rearing children outside conventional families could pose a more radical challenge to institutionalised heterosexuality. This, however, is played down in the Liberty report. Liberty's defence of the rights of lesbians and gays to parent, and especially to foster and adopt, is couched in terms of the difficulties faced by



lesbian and gay couples (p. 43). This presupposes the normality and desirability of monogamous coupledom. Presumably the aim is to appear respectable and reasonable — but it also reflects an insensitivity to issues of gender.

Although the report mentions the specific problems faced by lesbian mothers — loss of custody of their children and barriers to access to assisted conception — it assumes a generalised opposition to lesbian/gay parents. This is not the case, since that opposition is clearly related to the gender of the parent as well as

recognition of gender difference in relation to the specific problems faced by lesbian mothers, the report largely ignores differences between lesbians and gay men.

The problem of consent

Another obviously gender specific issue is the campaign for an age of consent which applies equally to heterosexuals and homosexual men. What is not widely recognised, and is not mentioned in Liberty's coverage of the issue, is that the age of consent is a gendered concept —



their sexuality. The work that has been done on lesbian mothers by organisations such as Rights of Women suggests that one of the reasons why they lose custody of children is that their children are growing up without being subject to the proper patriarchal authority. Similarly, the 'virgin mothers' scare around Artificial Insemination by Donor in 1991 entailed publicly expressed outrage that women should dare to become pregnant without men, without being 'possessed' by a man, without fulfilling conventional feminine obligations to men (see Jill Radford in *T&S* 21).

The gender division underpinning heterosexuality means that gays and lesbians are not simply commonly oppressed through their homosexuality but are located differently in relation to compulsory heterosexuality. Rights pursued by gay men may not, therefore be rights for lesbians. Aside from the (very) limited

it applies only to heterosexual women. There is no age of consent for heterosexual men, but rather an age of assumed sexual capability — and therefore of criminal culpability for such acts as rape. In other words the law encodes a model of heterosexual acts as something men do and women merely consent to (or not). Feminists have long been aware that this derives from a history in which male sexual access to a woman's body was an act of appropriation whereby a man gained rights over a woman's person, property and labour. This history should not be ignored, for we do not yet live beyond its influence.

The extension of the concept of the age of consent to gay men has been a result of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. The only model available for the enforcement of age-limits was one developed through heterosexist assumptions of sexual activity and passivity,

effectively positioning (sic) gay men in an analogous situation to straight women: consenting to have 'it' done to them. This model of sexual relations is clearly absurd since in practice both active and passive partners are equally liable to prosecution for sex with someone under the age of consent. Yet the assumption of an active older man and a passive younger man certainly shapes the thinking of some of those who oppose lowering the age of consent, who see it as a license for men to bugger young boys. I am not suggesting that the age of consent campaign is misguided, merely that it should be recognised that it does not render gay men formally equal to heterosexual men but rather to heterosexual women. This holds true whether one regards the age of consent for women as repressive discriminatory legislation or a necessary protection against male sexual exploitation.

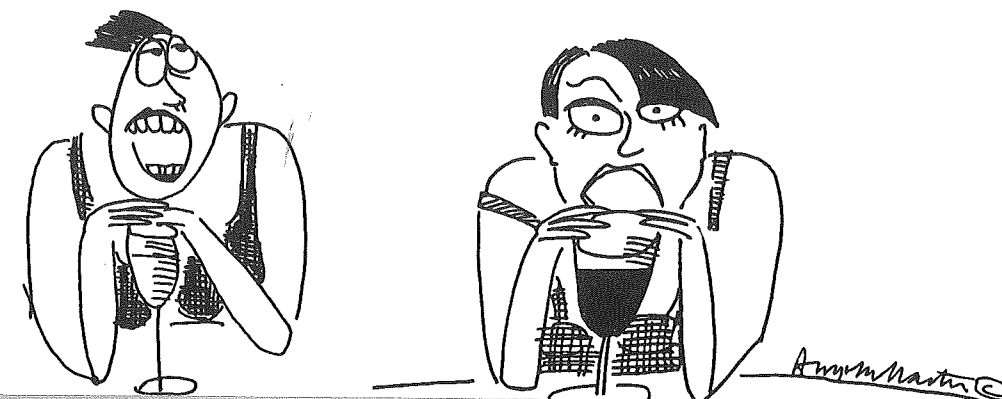
The lack of attention given to these issues is surprising since the NCCL (now Liberty), argued in the early 1980s for the removal of the age on consent on the grounds of sex discrimination — an argument controversial at the time since many feminists felt (and still feel) that it was necessary to protect young women from sexual violence and exploitation. The history of heterosexual age of consent legislation has also been much debated among feminists, particularly in terms of whether its protective intent was progressive for women or repressive of their sexuality. This has been ignored despite the fact that it was the same piece of legislation — the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 — which both raised the heterosexual age of consent to 16 and outlawed 'acts of gross indecency between men'.

Whose rights?

The issue of consent serves to underline, yet again, that the pursuit of rights 'equal' to those of heterosexuals is far from unproblematic, and that the way in which heterosexuality has been

constructed and institutionalised should be questioned. Throughout Liberty's report, the social construction of heterosexuality remains unexamined. Moreover, the focus on individual rights diverts attention away from social inequalities which are not amenable to change simply through legal reform. We cannot even begin to challenge heterosexual hegemony while limiting our concept of equality to formal, individual rights. The fact that women have gained many such rights without attaining social equality should demonstrate the limitations of a politics of rights which ignores the structural bases of social inequality.

To whom, in any case, do the lesbians and gays of the 'rights' lobby want to be equal: heterosexual women or heterosexual men? I suspect that many gay men are seeking equality with heterosexual men and are quite happy to leave lesbians the less enviable goal of equality with heterosexual women. Lesbian feminists, of course, have continued to fight for equality for all women and an end to gender hierarchy. This does not mean equality with men, or being like men for, as Christine Delphy puts it in 'Rethinking sex and gender', 'if women were the equals of men, men would no longer equal themselves' (p. 8). That is to say, since men and women are categories rooted in a hierarchical division of gender, without that hierarchy the categories would cease to be socially significant. The same logic can and should be extended to the division between homo- and heterosexualities. If real equality existed heterosexuality would no longer be what it is today. To seek equality with heterosexuals is a logical absurdity since it cannot happen without displacing heterosexuality from its status as privileged, institutionalised norm. Rather the goal should be to make the anatomical contours of one's chosen sexual partners socially irrelevant. This itself requires that gender ceases to be a significant factor in the way we organise our sexual and social lives. □



Note

This article arises out of, and owes much to, collaborative work with Momin Rahman.

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Motives and Meanings

Feminists were mostly silent about the Rose West case in spite of having an analysis of sex crime, because female perpetrators of sex murder seemingly did not fit that analysis. Debbie Cameron argues that we can understand female sex murderers within a feminist framework.

The story so far...

In an earlier piece (*T&S* 33) I wrote critically about the way mainstream commentators represented Rosemary West using the largely fictional concept of the 'female serial killer'. Media pundits and their tame experts were seemingly gripped by a liberal desire to believe that everything, including sexual abuse and killing, is now an equal opportunity activity. But beneath this liberal fetish of equality there lurked a less liberal anti-feminism. The real point was to convey a message that when feminists go on and on about male violence they are simply airing political prejudices with no firm basis in fact.

As I argued before, this is nonsense. Women's contribution to serial killing is so insignificant that Robert Ressler, the former FBI agent who coined the term and is widely considered to be the world's leading expert on the phenomenon (he is without doubt the world's most tireless propagandist for it), feels able in his memoir *Whoever Fights Monsters* to

dismiss the whole question in a single paragraph:

I am often asked why I don't discuss female serial killers. Only one female has been arrested and accused as a serial killer — Aileen Wuornos in Florida. Although there may be others, my extensive research has not come across them. ...Do the psychological impairments that characterize the men also describe the personalities of violent women? Frankly, I don't know; such research remains to be conducted (p.93).

I will return to the FBI's 'extensive research' on serial killers and the 'psychological impairments that characterize the men'. At this point, what I want to draw attention to is this expert's frank admission that where women do, exceptionally, engage in violent acts similar to those of male serial killers, he and other researchers don't know what lies behind their behaviour. All serious commentators on the case of Rose West, including feminist ones, found themselves looking into the same explanatory void. That is my starting point for this second piece about the West case: how do we as feminists deal with the issues without resorting

to fiction ('the female serial killer'), to sex stereotyping ('the murderous mother') or simply to silence?

Problems and pitfalls

As far as I know, there has been very little published feminist commentary on the West case, and I don't think that's coincidental. Talking about it from a feminist perspective (particularly in public, given the climate of mainstream anti-feminism which almost guarantees that what you say will be misinterpreted) is not easy. Any attempt to do so must negotiate a number of potential pitfalls.

One of these is a defensive desire to say nothing about what Rose West actually did, for fear of just reinforcing the crude misogyny of the mainstream. It's tempting to concentrate on how exceptional her crimes were, and how outrageously she was scapegoated by the media ('The Most Depraved Woman On Earth', as *The Sun* newspaper trumpeted in November 1995). An observation that recurred in conversations with other feminists was that 'one abusive woman doesn't cancel out 999 men: why aren't they talking about the real culprits?' The point is a reasonable one, and we should lose no opportunity to make it in public; but it cannot be all we say, for it totally sidesteps the hard questions about Rose West herself.

We also need to resist any assumption that our role as feminists is to find excuses for Rose West, to explain her behaviour away as opposed to just explaining it. I am not saying *T&S* readers would themselves make this assumption, but we need to be aware of how commonly it is made by others about us. During the trial I was amazed how often colleagues and casual acquaintances — not to speak of reporters — just took it for granted that the 'natural' tendency for anyone with my political beliefs would be to spring immediately to Rose West's defence.

More subtly, there's a danger of normalising Rose West's behaviour or playing down her own responsibility for it, by saying in effect 'yes, what she did was awful, but in her position many women might have done it'. This is the kind of argument which has been used — sometimes successfully and sometimes with support from feminists — in trials of what the FBI calls 'compliant victims', i.e. severely abused women whose involvement in multiple rapes and/or murders initiated by their male

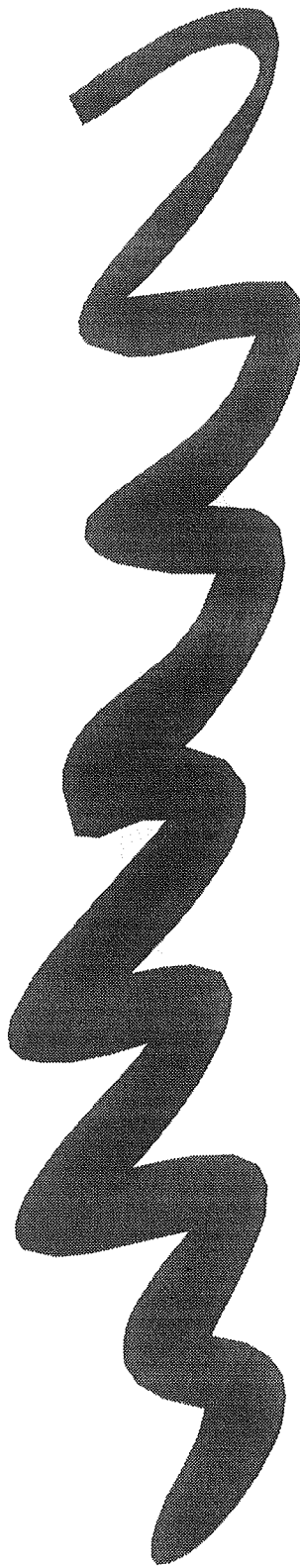
partners occurred under duress. In some ways it parallels the 'self-preservation' argument about women who have killed their abusers (in some circumstances a woman may perceive her only choice as 'kill or be killed'); though I find it much more problematic to extend that argument to the killing (not to mention the rape and torture) of someone other than the abuser.

Still, there have been instances where I think this posed a genuine dilemma for feminists. An example is the case of Canadian Karla Homolka, who participated with her husband Paul Bernardo in the abduction, sexual abuse and murder of two teenage girls, as well as the abuse of her own younger sister which resulted in the sister's death from the drugs they gave her to stop her resisting. Karla Homolka got a deal in exchange for testifying against Bernardo, and in consideration of her plea that she was horrifically abused by him and feared for her own life if she did not participate in the killings as he directed. I have often asked myself where I would have stood on the Homolka case if I had been an activist in Canada at the time: the answer is, I don't know.

Rose West: abuser and victim?

In the West case feminists were spared this dilemma, at least in public, because Rose West's defence did not try to portray her systematically as a 'compliant victim'. The issue of her being abused by her partner in crime, Fred West, was only one minor ingredient in a stew of more or less feeble arguments which seemed almost to have been thrown together at random (I often wondered why the defence was so inept; perhaps it was assumed that the verdict was a foregone conclusion).

Privately, however, most of the feminists I talked to during the trial believed that the question warranted more attention than it actually got. To feminists, the evidence strongly suggested that Rose West was not only an abuser but also a victim herself. It seemed obvious, for instance, that she was abused by Fred West. It was also rumoured (and several reporters claiming 'inside information' assured me the rumours were true) that the authorities were covering up, or at least refusing to fully investigate, the true extent of the abuse that went on in the 'house of horror', in which many people besides the Wests — including police officers — may have been involved. No-one familiar with the workings of organised abuse



networks could overlook the possibility that 25 Cromwell Street was at the centre of such a network, and that women in the house, including Rose West, were more extensively victimised than anyone who knew the full details was willing to admit on the record.

It also seemed likely that Rose West had a longer history of sexual abuse going back to childhood. Family sources spoke of her being forced into sex with her father and grandfather; outside the family she was said to have been sexually active at 14, picked up for soliciting at 15 and raped on at least two occasions. If these (depressingly plausible) reports are true then even before she met Fred West, Rose West's life was a catalogue of exploitation and abuse.

Feminists who made the point about victimisation did not mean it crudely as an excuse for Rose West's own behaviour towards other women and children. No-one I spoke to questioned Rose West's guilt. But the issue of her victimisation was certainly assumed to be relevant to the explanation of her actions. Her abuse of others was seen as the consequence of the hideous abuse she had suffered, and perhaps was still suffering, herself. This is the argument I want to examine in detail. While I agree it is relevant to ask whether Rose West was abused, I want to argue that the relationship between what was done to her and what she did to others is not a straightforward matter.

Something that I find particularly troubling in the 'cause-and-effect' line of argument is that a similar reasoning underpins the currently orthodox account of why men engage in this kind of abusive behaviour. Experts on 'serial killing' like Robert Ressler also locate the genesis of (male) killers in their early experiences of abuse. Is something wrong when feminists are echoing the theories of FBI behavioural scientists—theories we are highly critical of in other contexts? How do we make sense of the apparent contradiction?

One way to resolve it would be to invoke the 'equal opportunities' discourse in which the gender of an abuser becomes an irrelevance. But this would hardly be acceptable to the feminists who raised the question of Rose West's own victimisation; and anyway, whether or not she was victimised, it is clear gender was not an irrelevance in the life she shared with Fred West. Sexually 'unconventional' the couple may have been (if that term can be stretched to cover 'sadistic, abusive and homicidal'), but every-

thing we know about their 'lifestyle' implies a thoroughly traditional view of male-female relations. In many activities which we know they engaged in, their roles were neither interchangeable nor equal — for example, with or without her consent, it was Fred who prostituted Rose and not the other way round. More generally, to live at 25 Cromwell Street was to inhabit a culture which concentrated every conceivable form of sexual violence against women and children: pornography, prostitution, rape and murder. However actively and enthusiastically she participated in it, a woman within such a culture could not be in exactly the same position as a man.

At the same time, I do not want to assume that Rose West shared nothing with her husband, that her role was at all times and in all ways utterly different from his. I do not feel able to assume that, because the evidence is against so simple a view. Before I elaborate on that point, however, it is necessary to digress from the main thread of the argument and consider in more detail what the couple actually did, and why.

Unspeakable acts: the meaning of sex murder

In my earlier piece I suggested that mainstream commentary had failed to get to the root of what Rose and Fred West were doing during their career as abusers and murderers. Most attention was given to the abuse of the children in the West household and the murder of two of them; this was treated as the key to the case, if not the whole story. Conversely, silence was maintained on all kinds of other issues that seemed to me to leap out of the court reports. These issues were, it seemed, 'unspeakable': the tabloids alluded to them in prurient 'shock horror' terms, but more serious analysts had little or nothing to say about them.

For instance, I read nothing addressing the peculiar significance of race in the sexual lives of the Wests, though the subject cropped up in the evidence repeatedly. Sex with Black men appears to have had a particular meaning for Rose and Fred West, but no-one tried to make anything of this. Serious commentators also shrank from saying anything about the fact that Rose West was a self-identified bisexual. This was either seen as one more sign of her general depravity, or else it was ignored.

If these issues leapt out of the evidence for

me, it is because I see a pattern in them, which fits with my theoretical understanding of what sexual murder is about. That understanding, in turn, is based on studying numerous case histories from the last hundred years. The West case exhibits many similarities with the other cases I have looked at, and this leads me to believe that similar motives and meanings are at issue in it. Like other sexual killers, what Rose and Fred West were doing in the course of their criminal career was constructing a form of identity based on sexual transgression and existential transcendence — concepts I will now explain.

Transgression and transcendence

What, one might ask, could possibly connect such activities as having sex with Black men and abducting young white women, or engaging in lesbian sex and spying on your children in the toilet? On the face of it these things are not the same, and we would not want to judge them in the same way: for feminists, obviously there is nothing in principle wrong about interracial or lesbian sex, whereas abduction and voyeurism are inherently repellent. But what matters here is how the Wests connected things in their own mental moral order. In their worldview, which was remote from any feminist one, all their sexual practices — not just the most obviously heinous ones like abduction, murder and child sexual abuse but also sex with Black men, sex for money, S/M, bi- and homosexuality, voyeurism and pornography — represented the forbidden.

This connects to what I am calling 'transgression and transcendence'. Since the late eighteenth century there has been a set of ideas connecting sexual transgression (that is, flouting taboos, being what today's Queer Theorists romanticise as a sexual 'outlaw') with personal freedom and transcendence of the social constraints which restrict more 'ordinary' people. Acts and persons which are conventionally forbidden are, equally conventionally, erotically charged. The pornography on sale in any sex shop displays in its most banal form the range of transgressions which are culturally coded in this way, from Asian Babes to Snuff. The Wests appear to have embraced virtually all of them.

Murder, of course, is considered in our culture the ultimate forbidden act, the last taboo: that is why, for some, it is also the ultimate

turn-on. 'True' sex killers do not kill in a panic or in cold blood, to silence someone they have abused in lesser ways, but because they are aroused by the idea of having total control over another person, not just temporarily (as with rape) but forever. In almost every case they begin their criminal careers with less serious transgressions and escalate; at the same time they do not necessarily lose interest in 'lesser' crimes. It is not uncommon to find that someone who has committed several murders has also, during the same period, committed a string of quite 'ordinary' rapes. In other words, the latter stages of a sex-killer's career are often characterised by involvement in a number of sexually transgressive scenarios. This also seems to have been true of the Wests, and it is another reason why I distrust any account that does not consider the whole range of their activities — that focuses, for instance, on their abuse of their own children to the exclusion of all else.

The idea of eroticised transgression/transcendence can in fact be applied to the sexual abuse of children, and to incest, since intergenerational and intrafamilial sex are conventionally forbidden. Let me emphasise that this is not the only meaning of child sexual abuse — the 'forbidden fruit' element is not equally significant for every abuser, there are other motives for eroticising children and other reasons (such as ease of access and control) to choose them as victims — but it is one possible meaning, and in the case of the Wests, who were steeped in a whole culture of sexual transgression, it seems likely that this meaning was relevant.

The point I am trying to emphasise is that the various socially and sexually transgressive activities of Fred and Rose West need to be considered in their totality if we are to make any sense of the case. However diverse these activities seem, and despite the fact that some of them must strike us as much worse than others, together they do add up to a coherent picture which is, in addition, typical of this kind of offender. But the coherence does not lie in any obvious similarity among the various acts themselves; it lies in what they meant to the actors, Fred and Rosemary West.

The idea that what they meant was transcendence, freedom and power will be important in my argument about the significance of gender and of victimisation in the explanation of Rose West. Let me return to that now, beginning with

the most obvious, and so far unanswered, question: was Rose West, in the sense I have just outlined, a 'true sexual killer'? Having acknowledged the likelihood that she was herself severely abused, how can I be sure she was not a 'compliant victim'?

Sexual killer or compliant victim?

The short answer is that I cannot be absolutely sure about this, and it is only fair to say that she does fit some (though not many) elements of the FBI profile for compliant victims. On balance, however, I think Rose West really is a sexual killer, by which I mean a person who kills the (generic) object of their sexual desire, often after sexually abusing and torturing them, and derives sexual gratification from these activities. Furthermore, I believe Rose West is the first and only female sexual killer to become known to the authorities in any part of the world. The other women whose cases I am familiar with, including Myra Hindley and Aileen Wuornos, may have been labelled in the same way, but in my view they are not the same. So the claim I am making about Rose West here is, by my own standards, a pretty momentous one. It begs the question, 'what makes her so different?'

In a word, sexuality. It is Rose West's sexuality (by which I do not mean only her capacity to be sexually aroused by women, though that is relevant; I am talking about the whole range of her sexual desires and practices, so far as these can be known) that distinguishes her from all previous women killers labelled 'sexual sadists'. Although I readily admit we are dealing with an area of great uncertainty (the sexual desires and feelings of people who have every reason to misrepresent them), it is my view that all the other women who have been placed in the category of 'sexual killer' or its cloudier successor 'serial killer' have in some way failed to meet the criteria for 'true' sexual killing.

It is particularly notable that the gender of these alleged women sex-killers' victims usually does not match their own avowed sexual preferences — something which is never observed in cases of sex murder committed by men. For example, Aileen Wuornos, the only known case of a woman killer acting alone, is universally acknowledged to be a lesbian, but all her victims were men. This lends credence to the argument that her motive was actually revenge or self-defence. Then there are the 'compliant victims': heterosexual women who

participate along with a man in the killing of women and children — mainly though not exclusively girls. Their part in murder is coerced, and typically scripted by the man (i.e. he tells them what to do and say). I am not prepared to rule out the possibility that some of these women do derive sexual pleasure from killing, but if they do, they appear to get it not because they are aroused by their victims, or directly by the abuse of those victims, but because they are aroused by the arousal of their male partners. (This would be my preferred explanation for Myra Hindley's actions. I do not know if she was abused or coerced by Brady, and the account she wrote for *The Guardian* last year suggests she participated voluntarily. But I suspect that any pleasure she took in what they did came mainly from the fact that it gave Brady such intense pleasure.)

But Rose West seems to be a different case. It looks as if she sometimes acted alone, and there is some evidence that she participated in the scripting of the couple's torture and murder scenarios rather than simply acting out a script designed by her husband. Furthermore, her avowed bisexuality makes it more plausible that she did not gratify her own desires only by gratifying Fred's; she could have desired the women victims (and mastery over them) in the same way he did.

It is true that we do not know as much about the couple's relationship as we might have done had Fred West lived to stand trial: in that case, presumably, each of the two defendants would have tried to place the burden of guilt on the other, and the issue of who did what and why would have been probed in much more depth. As it is, there will always be uncertainty about this. But as much as I might like to think that Rose West was merely compliant, the extremely long duration of her involvement in the abuse and the range of her activities (some of them undertaken independently) make me doubt that this was so — or at least that it was always so. It seems likely that Rose was introduced by various male abusers to a culture of abuse, but it also seems possible that she went on to make that culture her own. It is therefore important to look at what she might have got out of that process, and what — apart from pure coercion — might have impelled her to embark on it. This brings us back to the question of victimisation, its relation to abuse and the relation of both to gender.

Gender and abuse: illogical arguments

Earlier I noted that one line of feminist argument — that Rose West's abusive behaviour might be explained by her own experience of being abused — resembles a currently influential argument about male sexual killers. This argument will be depressingly familiar to feminists from other contexts, for it is a version of our old friend the 'cycle of abuse'. Its central thesis is that sex murderers (or serial killers as they're now called) are an extreme manifestation of this alleged cycle, being almost invariably survivors of sexual abuse themselves.

Liz Kelly has noted serious methodological flaws in much of the research which is supposed to 'prove' this correlation between abusing and having been abused (see *T&S* 33). She criticises researchers for lumping together different types of abuse (e.g. emotional, physical, sexual: if a physical abuse survivor goes on to commit sexual abuse, in what sense is this a 'cycle'?) and also for making no distinction between being flashed at once and being raped every night for years. In the specific case of sex murderers, however, the research evidence available is less vulnerable to such criticisms. While I would never suggest that the methods used by FBI profilers, for instance, are perfect, they do have some virtues — the FBI have the resources to do in-depth interviewing over long periods, privileged access to a sizeable sample of the target group, and a suitably sceptical attitude to what they are told by informants whom they regard as practised liars (a perception which is not always shared by clinicians doing similar research).

Studies conducted by the FBI suggest that around 70% of convicted serial sexual murderers (all, of course, men) experienced childhood sexual abuse. Though this is not a sufficient explanation of their subsequent behaviour (and would not be even if the figure were 100%), the percentage is high enough that I do not feel able to dismiss the finding as irrelevant or meaningless.

Explaining what exactly it does mean is another matter, however. As Liz Kelly points out, 'cycle of abuse' accounts have logical as well as methodological flaws, and gender is the rock on which their logic tends to founder. An obvious objection to the theory that abused children become abusive adults has always been, and in spite of Rose West still is, that the most numerous group of abused children —

girls — is also the least likely to grow up to abuse others. Abused girls are, sadly, statistically common, whereas abusive women are rare: the theory does not add up. No wonder most feminists reject 'cycle of abuse' explanations of child sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Fine lines

But where does this leave the feminists I talked about earlier, with their belief that Rose West behaved in the way she did because she had been abused, and was perhaps still being abused, herself? Although I tend to disagree with this idea in the particular case of Rose West, I am aware that no account, including my own, can possibly be definitive when so much vital information is missing or has been suppressed. If new information emerged, the argument might become more plausible — I am not saying I couldn't be persuaded of its relevance. Yet even if the facts were clearer, I would still be troubled by the inconsistency of feminists decisively rejecting a line of argument about violent men, only to embrace it in the case of a violent woman. A feminist theory which says, in effect, that if men abuse it has nothing to do with their own history of abuse whereas if women abuse it has everything to do with it, is — to my mind anyway — illogical and untenable.

I am not making a liberal, 'equal opportunity' argument here. What bothers me is not the implication that abused girls and women are in a different position from abused boys and men — by and large I agree that they are, and I will come back to this point later. Rather, what bothers me is the implication that being abused has a determining effect on the subsequent behaviour of (some) women which it does not have in the case of (any) men; they abuse because they want to and they can, but if we abuse we must have been driven to it by forces beyond our control.

It may be a fine line between suggesting that in some circumstances women do not have a meaningful choice — e.g. battered women who kill, or some women in ritual abuse networks as discussed by Kate Cook and 'the A-Team' (*T&S* 32)—and implying that women as a subordinate group must inevitably lack agency, responsibility and will. But I know which side of that line I want to be on. I don't believe in equal opportunity sex-murder, but nor can I go along

with the idea that women who do terrible things should automatically be treated as a special case, as not responsible for their actions.

More than one answer

It seems I am back to the question, what (if anything) is the relationship between being abused and becoming an abuser? Before I try to answer, some general points need to be clarified. I will be concerned with the very extreme (and very rare) case of sexual murderers. How far my comments should be taken to apply to any other case is difficult to say. I also want to emphasise that I would never claim all sex murderers are sexual abuse survivors (30% of the FBI's sample were not); still less would I wish to imply the converse, that all, most or even many survivors go on to abuse other people—let alone to kill them. The argument I want to pursue is much more restricted: it is simply that there is more than one way to answer the question, 'why do [some] abuse survivors go on to abuse?' — particularly, to repeat, where this applies to sexual killers.

My own answer aims to avoid two main pitfalls: first, determinism (while I do not suppose we have absolute free will, I do not want to naturalise abusive behaviour in any circumstances); and second, false gender neutrality (that is, I want to explain why the people we are talking about are overwhelmingly men — though without excluding the rare cases in which they are women).

The common sense popular understanding of why abuse leads to more abuse takes two main forms. One depends on the notion that some abuse survivors are so scarred by their early experiences and/or so lacking in models of 'normal' relationships, they simply repeat the only patterns they know: abusing is a negative and inadequate response by a damaged and broken personality. An alternative account represents the move from being abused to abusing as a strategy for getting revenge on a world which has hurt and humiliated you: it is the outcome not of simple inadequacy but of rage. In a more expert, clinical context, either of these two accounts can be elaborated in various ways to suit various brands of psychotherapeutic doctrine.

In relation to the murderers I have studied (not by talking to them myself, incidentally, but by examining their own representations and those of 'experts' to whom many of them have

talked at length), I regard these accounts as misleading. The first one is almost entirely unconvincing, because as Liz Kelly has also pointed out, when an abused individual abuses they are not repeating but reversing their past experience. The second, 'rage' account seems more plausible as an explanation of that reversal, but I believe that in the case of sex murder it focuses on something which is secondary, not primary. It's true that many killers do talk about rage (and their actual crimes suggest a very high degree of it); some use the word revenge when they discuss their motivation. But I would see revenge, which centres on the desire to punish others, as secondary to the fundamental motive, which centres more on the subject, the self: transcendence.

Masters of the universe

Many murderers are eager to talk about themselves (a fact which has underpinned the new science of 'profiling'); some have written at length about their crimes or even made and preserved actual recordings of them. The result is that we have quite a lot of information on how sexual killers understand their own experience.

The most pronounced characteristic of that understanding is solipsism: a conviction that the whole universe revolves around you, that you are its master and that other people exist only to confirm your own supreme importance. Sex killers are living embodiments of a philosophy summarised in George Orwell's novel 1984, when Winston Smith is being interrogated by his torturer, O'Brien: "How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?" Winston thought. "By making him suffer", he said. The purpose of the victim's suffering is the assertion of the abuser's power. That assertion culminates in the victim's destruction, and not uncommonly continues with further abuse after death — which is surely the absolute extreme of solipsism, since the victim is no longer able even to suffer.

This kind of murder is centrally about asserting the power of the person who commits it. Punishment is only the means, not the end. What sex killers do to their victims must certainly feel like punishment, but from the killer's solipsistic viewpoint what matters is rather mastery. In killers' accounts and in the representations many make of their crimes, it is made clear that what the killer considers

'punishment' is inflicted only in anger when mastery fails. Most commonly this happens when the victim refuses to comply with the killer's demands, thus implicitly rejecting the status of worthless object or slave. Abuse inflicted when the victim is compliant (terrified or drugged or indeed already dead) is not conceived by the killer as punishment, because it is not about the victim, or a response to the victim's actions. Rather it is about the killer and his ability to transcend the fundamental social law of intersubjectivity (the assumption that other people's experience impinges on ours and vice versa) in mastering another person completely, negating that other's will and thus (as the killer sees it) demonstrating the absolute freedom of his own.

It is this feeling of absolute power and freedom which affords pleasure, including and indeed particularly sexual pleasure. The dependence of pleasure on mastery over another is the link feminist analysts perceive between the extreme behaviour of sexual murderers and 'normal' masculinity.

The 'transcendent' subject is enraged by what he regards as the obstacles and constraints placed upon his freedom of action by a social order that does not recognise his superiority to other people and his right to dispose of them as he wishes. The classic example in literature is Dostoevski's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (a book Ian Brady preferred to *Porn*), who believes that as a 'superman' he has a perfect right to kill, and who murders an old woman in order to demonstrate the validity of that assumption. The fictional Raskolnikov gets his rage against the world, his desire to transcend its petty constraints and his beliefs about how this may be achieved from reading what Dostoevski called 'half-baked philosophy'. But some real-life killers may well get their desire for transcendence from their experience of being abused, of being the object of somebody else's desire for transcendence.

That desire is always fuelled by the feeling that one has been reduced, unjustly, to a state of worthlessness (to 'some trembling vermin' as Raskolnikov puts it); in cases where the desire is harboured by a survivor of abuse, the feeling of worthlessness is grounded in past experience. For such a survivor, the quest for transcendence is not merely an acting out of half-baked philosophy, but may be experienced as a means to psychological survival. It is not that abuse

'causes' or leads inevitably to more abuse; it is that people who have been abused have a powerful motive for seeking transcendence; putting it crudely, they have more than most other people to transcend. Transgressive or abusive behaviour is one means to do this — but it is by no means the only one.

Gender and abuse revisited

So why is it (almost) exclusively male survivors who make use of this strategy? I would suggest, because to do it you have to have a huge conviction of your own entitlement and power; you must feel that your individual status as a victim is somehow a temporary accident, an injustice, and you also have to be able to imagine — and to derive gratification from imagining — that you could be a victimiser of other people instead.

Unlike a lot of 'experts', I don't see this process of imagining yourself in a different position as a wholly internal, unconscious psychic drama, unaffected and unconstrained by external factors. On the contrary, I believe the imaginative identifications which are possible for women and men in this situation have a great deal to do with their assessment of what is possible for them in reality. Of course, there is also the question of individuals' own attitudes: most survivors would be repelled rather than gratified by the idea of abusing somebody else, even assuming they could conceive of being able to. There is undoubtedly a great deal of individual variation in people's responses to the experience of abuse. But gender affects the possibilities open to women and men to begin with.

Women and men are not in the same position, even when both are suffering the most hideous abuse; for they live in a world that treats their suffering differently. It is both more important, culturally speaking, for men to transcend it, and more conceivable that they could. Masculinity is by cultural convention incompatible with victim status, whereas femininity is not. Women in patriarchal society are given little or no sense of entitlement and power, and are thus more likely than most men to feel trapped in the victim position.

For this reason, I suspect that any woman who follows in Rose West's footsteps will act, as she did (and as virtually all other alleged women sexual killers have), in complicity with a man rather than alone. In a world where women



Debbie Cameron 'Wanted: the female serial killer' *T&S* 33, Summer 1996.

Kate Cook and 'the A-Team' 'Survivors and supporters' *T&S* 32, Winter 1995.

Liz Kelly 'Weasel Words' *T&S* 33, Summer 1996.

Robert K. Ressler and Tom Schactman *Whoever Fights Monsters: My Twenty Years Tracking Serial Killers for the FBI* (St Martin's Press 1992).

are not transcendent subjects, they have to be shown (by example, by encouragement, and often initially by a degree of coercion) that transcendence through transgression is either possible or pleasurable for them. However, I don't think we can rule out the possibility that some of them will discover it is both of those things.

Cultural logics

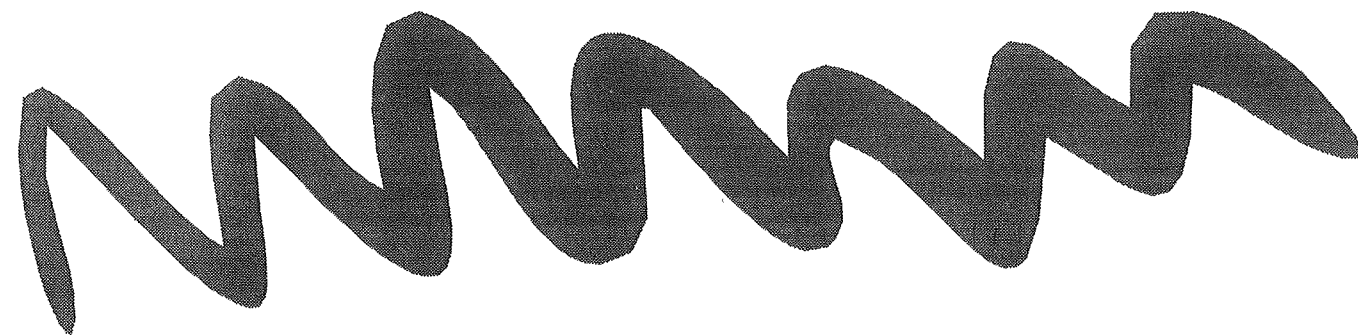
It may be a dismal conclusion, but if the most pertinent answer to the question 'why do so many men abuse?' is 'because they can', at least part of the answer to the corresponding question 'why do so few women abuse?' may be, 'because they usually can't'. The case of Rose West shows that this isn't always true: there are circumstances in which a woman can (albeit on conditions which do not apply to men, i.e. women are usually required to play a dual role as both abusers and victims); and there are women who elect to take advantage of those circumstances, who decide there is pleasure in transgression and transcendence.

None of this, however, should be taken to imply that from now on, the maniacs, beasts and monsters that haunt tabloid headlines are as likely to be women as men. We are still far from having equal opportunity sex murder. Nor should we be impressed by the oft-repeated argument according to which equal opportunity sex murder is one logical outcome of feminism — Rose West was merely ahead of her time, a harbinger of Things To Come, and an epidemic of Rose Wests will someday be the price we have to pay for equality. In pessimistic moments I sometimes think it might be the price we have to pay for spurious sexual 'liberation', but equality in the sense radical feminists understand it would have a wholly different effect.

All the observations I have made regarding

murder, sexual abuse, transgression and transcendence, men who rape and kill because they can and women who don't because they can't, etc., etc., are valid only in the context of patriarchy, a system in which social hierarchies are constructed and maintained by means of sexual exploitation and sexual terrorism. Prototypically these are hierarchies of gender, but the same means can be used (and often are) to police other hierarchical social relations — the use of rape to enforce pecking orders in men's prisons is one example. Variations in who actually occupies the social/sexual positions of dominant and subordinate can be accommodated within the system without changing its fundamental structure. And the same point applies to sexual murder: whatever the gender of the murderer (or the victim), the crime follows the cultural logic of patriarchy, and it is only within that logic that it makes any sense at all.

Radical feminism is a critique of patriarchal culture and patriarchal logic; its ultimate political goal is to get rid of patriarchy altogether. Meanwhile, it offers a positive alternative to the model of transcendence through transgression adopted by Rose West. I observed earlier that engaging in abusive behaviour is only one way to transcend the experience of being abused. By politicising their experience, and by engaging in collective struggle against the system which produces that experience, innumerable courageous women have become, not victims or abusers, but survivors and resisters. The best feminist response to Rose West, as I see it, is neither special pleading nor shamed silence. It is to continue to give women the possibility of a different kind of transcendence — through feminist consciousness and political action. □



Monumentally Male

The global tourism industry involves many women, both as workers and as consumers. Feminists have given considerable attention to the way women are exploited by the industry, most obviously through sex tourism; but we've had less to say about the sexism of what's on offer closer to home.

In Britain, tourism has long been an important economic activity, and its importance is increasing since it is often seen as a solution to the economic problems that arise when more traditional industries disappear from a local area. Contemporary strategies for promoting tourism in Britain are most frequently organised around the notion of 'heritage': visitors are invited to experience a carefully constructed representation of history and of place. But whose heritage is this, and what is it saying to/about women? Cara Aitchison takes us on a guided tour of Stirling, one of Scotland's premier tourist destinations, and suggests that for feminists it has rather few attractions...

Whilst the combined sectors of leisure and tourism are frequently cited as 'the world's fastest growing industry' or 'the world's largest industry' they are less frequently identified as the world's most sex-segregated industry or the world's most sex-role stereotyped industry. The leisure industry demonstrates gendered patterns of employment in virtually all areas of work, in addition to sex-role stereotyping with men greatly outnumbering women in the positions of power related to policy-making, planning, finance and senior management. In the UK only seven out of 146, or less than five per cent, of local authority leisure services departments are headed by a woman (Local Government Management Board 1996). In tourism women are concentrated in low-skilled, poorly paid and part-time areas of employment. This can be likened to a form of 'commercialised domesticity' for women where their domestic roles of

cleaning, cooking and home-making are replicated in the workplace.

There is a growing body of research which analyses the gendered nature of tourism provision and employment, but there is very little feminist research on tourism participation, the experience of women tourists or the role of gender in constructing and representing tourist attractions and destinations. Through an examination of heritage tourism in one location I will argue that the representation of 'heritage' serves to render women invisible in our past whilst maintaining masculinist identities centred around militarism and nationalism. The location I have chosen is the Scottish town of Stirling where I lived for ten years.

Heritage tourism

Feminist analysis needs to consider tourism not just as a type of business or management but as

a powerful cultural form and process which both shapes and is shaped by patriarchal society. One very evident example of tourism as a cultural form and process is the construction of 'heritage', which now forms an increasingly important element of the tourism industry, particularly within the UK. Just as landscapes are often 'man-made' constructions of the environment, heritage is a 'man-made' construction of the past. Many of our heritage attractions are constructed, represented and marketed by men. In addition to being 'man-made' these tourist attractions are patriarchally controlled, masculinised, and structured in such a way as to exclude women.

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Stirling

The heritage landscape of Stirling is a case in point. It is a product of the town's masculinised, militarised and nationalistic history which is, in part, linked to its geographical location. Stirling is located at the narrowest point between east and west in the whole of the British Isles and also overlooks the Carse of Forth which forms the divide between the Highlands of Scotland to the north and the Lowlands to the south. The town itself grew down the side of one of three volcanic outcrops in the area which rose above the marshland of the carse, a deep impenetrable moss which was not drained until the eighteenth century.

Stirling's economic and industrial history is a mix of market and garrison town supported by the primary industries of coal and agriculture. With the demise of coal mining and other related secondary industries in the 1980s, the town focussed upon financial and retail services, its university, and tourism as its major sources of income. There is a sense in which Stirling has sought to replace the masculinity of the collapsed male dominated industries with the masculinity of nationalist and militarist history; William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Rob Roy McGregor and the Stuart Kings feature heavily in product development, place promotion and marketing literature.

While Stirling's tourism industry has undoubtedly received huge economic benefits from the recent films of *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy* along with the less widely known film of *The Bruce* starring Oliver Reed, this type of place promotion may further serve to entrench the marketing of Stirling as a tourist destination within a framework of masculinist, militarist, and nationalist fervour. Such gendered marketing and place and product promotion serves to stimulate the male 'tourist gaze' and constructs women as 'the Other' by focussing on the iconography of a heritage landscape which emphasises masculine visibility and superiority through landmarks and monuments, buildings and statues, signs, symbols and banners, postcards and promotional literature.

Feminist analysis of heritage landscapes

Through an examination of the representational media just mentioned, it is possible to construct

a framework for future feminist analyses of heritage landscapes. This analytical framework could be used in critiques of existing heritage tourism sites and strategies, or more positively, could contribute to the creation of new development plans. Such a framework has to include an analysis of the representation or non-representation of women which includes the following six elements: constructions of 'the Other' in heritage tourism; the male 'tourist gaze'; the iconography of gendered tourism; nationalism and gendered heritage; militarism and gendered heritage; and masculinist myth making in heritage tourism.

Constructions of 'the Other'

The creation of a unique place or tourist destination frequently depends on the social construction of 'the Other'. This has been commented upon at some length in the literature of tourism anthropology and tourism sociology and there is widespread agreement that tourists often engage in the search for 'the Other'. The attempt to create and market an identity based on a unique heritage must coexist, however, with the need to facilitate the tourist's identification with that identity. Thus a balance must be sought between presenting something which is different and presenting something sufficiently familiar for the tourist to identify with. This can be achieved by using vehicles such as nationalism and militarism, combined with ancestral heritage, to provide the connections between the past and the present or between the familiar and 'the Other'.

But these connections are provided by men, for men and are about men. The heritage of Scottish women is not represented in Stirling and their absence makes them 'the Other'. Women tourists are also constructed as 'the Other' because they are expected to identify with a male construction of heritage which has rendered women invisible and perceives men, both past and present, as 'the norm'.

Most writers in the area of the tourism anthropology and tourism sociology cite Edward Said as the originator of the concept of 'the Other' in reference to the western social construction of 'orientalism'. The male-dominated discourse of tourism studies ignores the wealth of feminist writing on 'the Other' underpinned by the much earlier references to woman as 'the Other' by Simone de Beauvoir. Similarly, discussions of gender within tourism



Boer War Memorial at Stirling Castle



Rob Roy MacGregor

anthropology have tended to focus on sex tourism and the creation of the 'exotic Other' rather than recognising the all-pervasive patriarchal power of defining all women as 'the Other'.

The male 'tourist gaze'

References to 'the tourist gaze' entered tourism studies following the publication of John Urry's book of that title whereas previously the concept of 'the gaze' was more commonly associated with poststructuralists like Michael Foucault. The concept of the gaze is about the power of looking, and how the right to look in particular



Robert the Bruce at Stirling Castle

ways contributes to the power of some social groups (those who look) at the expense of others (those who get looked at). For instance, men look at women; first world anthropologists look at third world peoples; doctors look at patients. The looker/looked positions are rarely reversed. Central to the concept of the 'gaze' is the theory that knowledge is both socially constructed and socially constructing. The power of the gaze is unequally distributed and the object of the gaze is constructed according to the locus of power and control.

We are familiar with notions of the male gaze and the sexual objectification of women

but we are less familiar with notions of the male gaze directed at particular forms of masculinity rather than femininity in order to maintain male supremacy. Perhaps the most common example of this is seen in sports such as football where the male player is revered by the male spectator and reverence seems to increase with increasing displays of aggression by the player. Similarly, in heritage attractions, the male gaze is directed towards masculinist icons of a brutal and bloody past where representations of 'the gaze' and male constructions of 'the Other' are intertwined to maintain patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The iconography of gendered heritage

In addition to analysing written material, the heritage landscape, including artistic heritage, buildings, monuments, statues, symbols, signs and images can also be analysed and interpreted critically. In a piece called 'The Masculinisation of Stirling's Heritage', Tim Edensor and Uma Kothari argue that heritage production and consumption is gendered through a series of processes which, 'articulate masculinised notions of place and identity, and male dominated versions of the past which privilege white, male, heterosexual experience and activity'. They go on to identify the three sites of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Museum at Stirling Castle, the Bannockburn Monument and the Wallace Monument as forming the 'Stirling Triangle' each point of which reflects 'particular and partial histories and myths, male-defined landscapes and gendered national identities'. However, they do not expand their analysis to incorporate a critique of the all-pervasive nature of this masculinist landscape.

Whilst the three sites are undoubtedly influential in constructing Stirling's gendered heritage they are also part of a wider landscape which both emphasises additional gendered landmarks and monuments and simultaneously reasserts the power of the 'Stirling Triangle'. Thus, in addition to the towering landmarks of the castle, situated at the highest point of the old town, and the two monuments of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce located on escarpments to the north-east and south-west respectively, these icons are replicated throughout the town and their masculine imagery is augmented by the addition of other male icons and visual imagery.

The representation of Wallace and Bruce takes a number of forms in addition to the

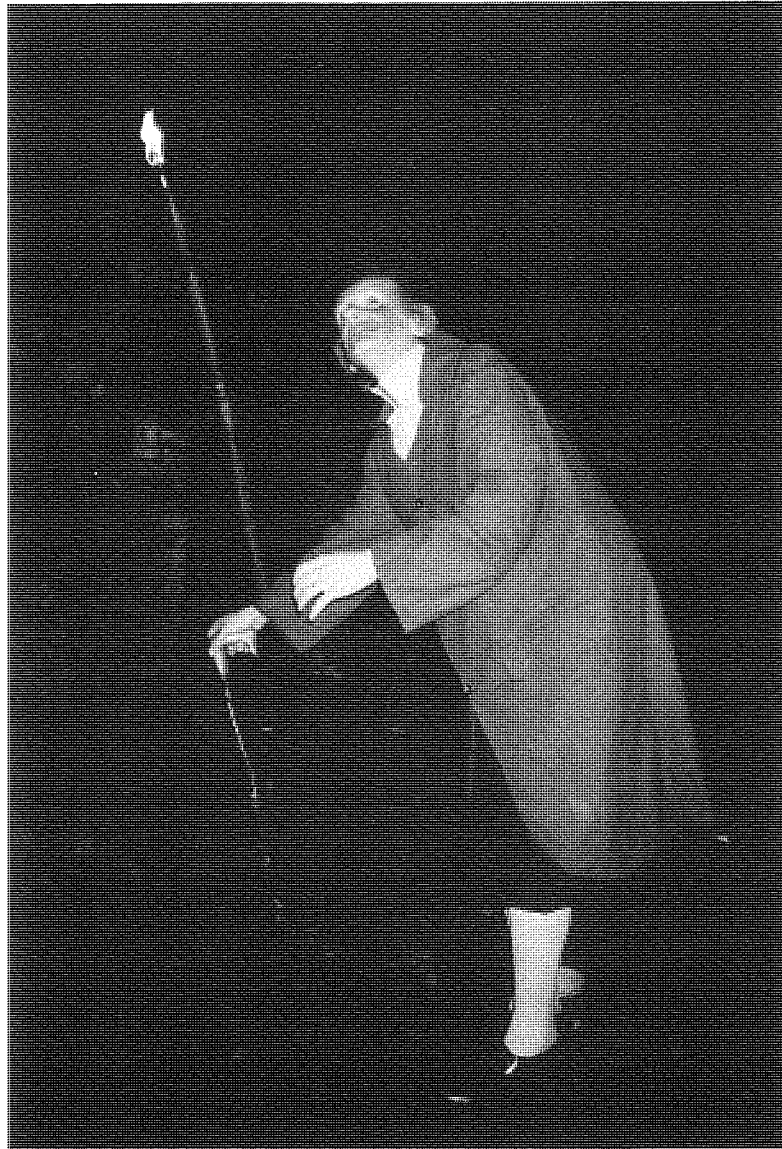
monuments which overlook the town from the two surrounding hillsides. Each male icon has a street and a number of public houses named after him; there are large statues of William Wallace at two of the most focal points within the town: the first is on the frontage of a public building called the Athenaeum which is sited at the top of King Street in the centre of the town and overlooking the main shopping area and the other is in front of the castle overlooking the castle esplanade. More recent representation takes the form of banners and logos with Robert the Bruce representing the area of Bannockburn in a series of banners, again in King Street, each identifying a different local area. The logo of 'Futureworld', a local tourist development and promotion project from the 1980s, consisted of Robert the Bruce on horseback surrounded by a rainbow. The current logo has swapped the rainbow for a banner which envelops Bruce with the words 'Royal Stirling' above a shield displaying a picture of the castle and the words 'Key to the Kingdom'. This slogan could be seen as reference to Stirling as the historic capital of Scotland, as the entrance to the Highlands, and as the locus of the history of the making of Scotland as a nation. In addition, postcards feature numerous images of the two icons from both near and far, conveying the heroic guardianship of the town.

Stirling's male dominated and male-defined history is evident in the names of buildings and their previous uses. Many of the buildings of the old town are now used as tourist attractions or as restaurants and coffee shops, primarily for tourists. In 1994 the Stirling Heritage Trail opened, featuring many of the buildings of the old town but without any critique of the gendered nature of the town's heritage or of the representation of that heritage. Old town buildings named after their original male residents include John Cowane's House, Glengarry Ludging, Spittal's House, Darnley's House, Norrie's House, Auchenbowie's House, Mar's Wark, the Argyll's Ludging, and the Erskine Church.

In addition to residential buildings and churches, Stirling's new heritage trail, which starts with 'a soldier's view' from the castle esplanade, includes many other buildings with male histories: the Old Military Prison, the Old Grammar School for boys, the Old High School, the Tolbooth and Prison, the Mercat Cross, and the Boy's Club.

Fatal attractions: 'Torture, death and damnation'

The Old Military Prison opened in April 1996 as a combination of tourist attraction and office space for local businesses. The redevelopment took over three years and cost £2.6 million of public money with funding coming from Forth Valley Enterprise, Stirling District Council (which no longer exists following local government restructuring in April 1996), and the European Regional Development Fund. The attraction is modelled, to a large extent, on Inverary Jail whose promotional literature states



Ghost Walk: Allan Mair

that the attraction has won a number of awards and recommendations for its display of 'torture, death and damnation: the story of Scottish crime and punishment 1500—1700' which features 'an introductory exhibition with blood curdling details of mediaeval punishments'. Neither attraction acknowledges the gendered nature of the history they seek to represent or the gendered nature of the textual representations.

In spite of protests at the 'Jack the Ripper Experience' at the London Dungeon by groups such as the Campaign Against Pornography, the heritage industry continues to portray uncritical representations of abuse, mutilation and murder of women as appropriate tourist attractions. Promotional literature for the London Dungeon invites tourists to 'Come with us down the dark, dank streets of London a century ago and maybe you too will feel the spirit of the Ripper as he stalks his next victim'. There are now a number of London tour companies offering 'Jack the Ripper' tours and one such company, run by four men and calling itself 'Ripping Yarns', distributes publicity containing the following:

For a completely different night out why not walk the very streets that were terrorised by a man who became known as JACK THE RIPPER. We take you where he committed the murders, we tell you how he mutilated his victims and, because a picture tells a thousand words, as we walk around we show you actual photographs — the only tour that does this.

The same obsession with violence and death is promoted by Stirling's new tourist attractions which feature the old Court Room and Prison in Jail Wynd off Broad Street. Prisoners condemned to death were taken from the prison to the Mercat Cross in Broad Street where hangings and beheadings were considered public entertainment. The Old High School has now been refurbished, extended and converted into a large hotel with the old headmasters' study being transformed into the bar. Hanging on the walls of the 'bar' are portraits of all the previous headmasters: women cannot even have a drink during their leisure time without suffering the male gaze from the past as well as the present.

Nationalism

The symbiotic relationship between masculinism and nationalism has been well documented. Less frequently discussed, however, is the role that nationalism plays within tourism promotion. A variety of forms of media have combined to reassert Scottish nationalism in

recent years and films such as *Braveheart*, *The Bruce* and *Rob Roy* have acted as catalysts for a tourism industry desperately in search of the familiar 'Other'.

The Wallace Monument epitomises the interrelationships between masculinity, militarism and nationalism in heritage production. The monument was refurbished to incorporate a variety of new visual displays in time to benefit from the additional tourists generated by the film *Braveheart*. The 220 foot high tower overlooks Stirling and the River Forth and was completed in 1869 as a monument to William Wallace who had led the defeat of Edward I of England at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297.

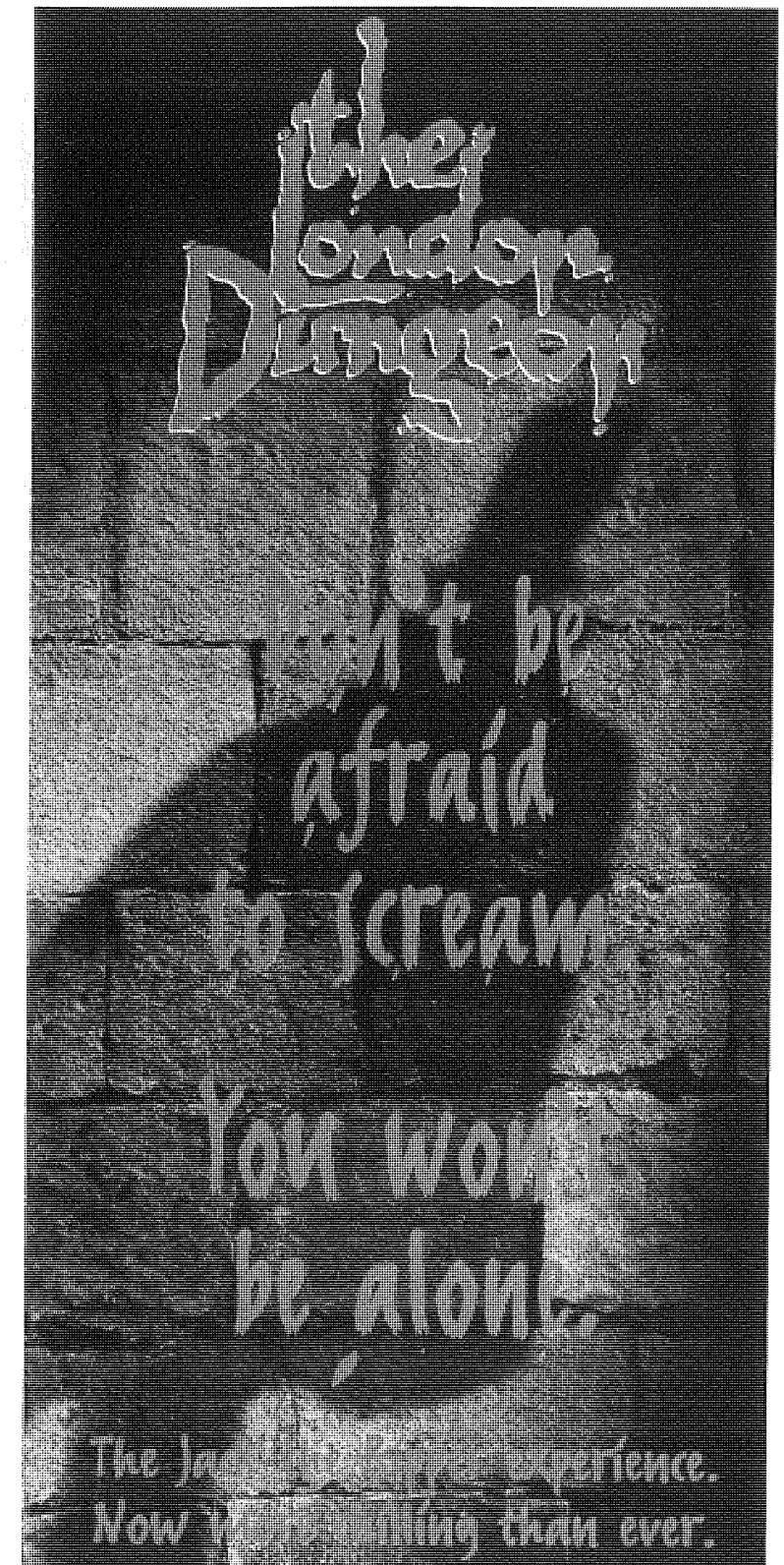
Heritage production within the monument uses a powerful combination of written text and pictures, statues, audio-visual displays, high-tech drama, costume, and music to recreate the past. Visitors entering the monument are overlooked by a huge bronze statue of Wallace with his sword drawn. The two-handed broadsword is then displayed on the first floor of the monument alongside a picture board display which presents a historical account of Wallace's life under titles like 'The Struggle Continues' and 'Capture and Execution'. In the centre of the same floor is a reconstruction of an English battle tent guarded by one of Edward's knights. Visitors are invited into the tent to witness 'a dramatised reconstruction and a talking head of William Wallace' who has been captured by the English following years of hiding after the Scottish defeat at the Battle of Falkirk in 1298.

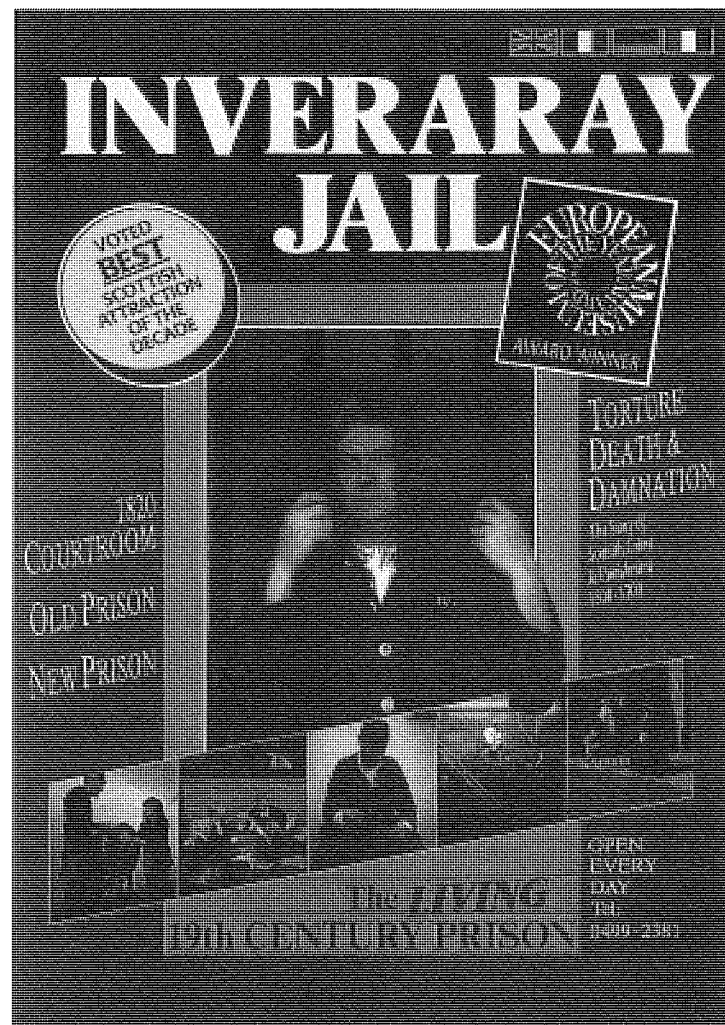
Whilst the technology may be commendable, the text and discourse of Wallace's talking head requires more critical analysis. Although in shackles, Wallace's posture and voice still command attention from his pulpit-like position as he gives his version of history, complete with anachronisms. Wallace introduces his account by stating, 'Men must have their power. They seek to influence, to strengthen their position, to be seen as something in other men's eyes'.

On the second floor of the monument is the 'Hall of Heroes'. The publicity literature informs the visitor that,

In this vaulted chamber you'll meet other great Scots, sculpted in marble. Writers, explorers, inventors and statesmen are here, including King Robert the Bruce, Sir Walter Scott, David Livingston, Robert Burns and James Watt, among others.

A large plaque within the Hall of Heroes tells visitors that 'In 1885, sixteen years after





the completion of the Monument; the Custodiers who were then responsible for its operation, launched an appeal for sponsors for a "hall of heroes of marble statues of very notable Scotsmen".

Militarism

The iconography of heritage tourism in Stirling is closely intertwined with militarism from different eras which reinforce notions of Scottish nationalism and masculinity. Wallace and Bruce are seen as national heroes because of their military victories. Stirling Castle and its regimental museum is a tourist attraction largely because of its militaristic heritage. Complementing the statue of William Wallace overlooking the castle esplanade is another statue of an Argyll and Sutherland Highlander with

bayonet drawn during the Boer War. There is a further sword-bearing statue in the form of Rob Roy MacGregor positioned in another focal point on the edge of the old town and The Old Military Prison reinforces the militaristic theme and further entangles the web of masculinism, militarism and nationalism. There are no statues of women anywhere within the town and no monuments to women's history.

Masculinist myth making

In addition to the gendering of heritage tourism outlined in the sections above, local tourist promotion has also embraced masculinised myth making in the name of tourism. Thus Rob Roy MacGregor, whose life history is not recorded accurately, has had a heroic past constructed for him through postcards, statues and a visitor centre. Rob Roy is known to have been a cattle thief and to have used extreme violence against both English and Scottish people. At the Rob Roy visitor centre tourists are encouraged to make up their own minds as to whether Rob Roy was a 'Hero or Villain?' but the language and imagery used to describe his life and character provide few challenges to the masculinism, violence and nationalism which are reconstructed through a romanticised heritage. Rather than seeing Rob Roy as a murderer, visitors are invited to view him as a 'rogue' and a 'ruffian' — words which fail to convey the full horror of the violence prevalent at the time and which also serve to strengthen the imagery of men's use of violence masquerading as emancipatory nationalism.

Tourism development in Stirling has also focussed upon Ghost Walks which are evening guided tours on foot led by a number of costumed male characters. These tours provide an even clearer example of the way in which tourists are invited to empathise with male violence. The Ghost Walk starts and finishes with speeches by Allan Mair, the last person to be hanged publicly in Stirling. Mair was hanged in 1843 for battering his wife to death and his ghost is said to haunt the Tolbooth which is now a restaurant. Although much of the information presented during the actor's performance is accurate historically, the performance has been constructed as a pantomime-like scene where Allan Mair protests his innocence to the audience, again in a 'roguish' manner, and the audience are encouraged to empathise with the murderer and are then invited to shout their



opinions as to his culpability for the crime. This reconstruction of the past results in a majority verdict of 'not guilty' for the murderer.

Challenging 'heritage'

A heritage trail has recently been constructed in Edinburgh to represent fifteen notable women from the city's past. Whilst this demonstrates that feminist resistance to a male dominated and male-defined heritage industry is possible, it also highlights the difficulty of working towards a redefinition of 'heritage'. The Edinburgh example can be seen as reflecting 'women's heritage' rather than 'feminist heritage', as it replicates existing models of heritage provision by simply replacing the 'great men' with 'great women' rather than challenging our current models of provision and our constructions of heritage.

In addition to increasing women's visibility within representations of heritage we must also

continue to resist and protest against existing and planned heritage sites which glorify men's use of violence, particularly against women. Such sites range from the London Dungeon and Jack the Ripper walks to many local tourist attractions in our home towns. Tourism and the heritage industry form the foundation of numerous local economic regeneration initiatives and require large numbers of visitors to sustain such regeneration. Adverse publicity, or even the threat of adverse publicity, may be sufficient to promote change within many public sector bodies such as local authorities and regional tourist boards. However, smaller commercial sector heritage tourism companies may require more persuasion to change their practices; direct action along the lines of the London Dungeon campaign organised by the Campaign Against Pornography may be more appropriate in some cases. □

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TRIANGLES AND TRIBULATIONS

THE GAY APPROPRIATION OF NAZI SYMBOLS

The pink triangle was originally a Nazi symbol — and it was only worn by gay men, not lesbians. Amy Elman questions whether the pink triangle can be 'reclaimed' as a symbol of gay pride. As well as obscuring the different histories of lesbians and gay men under the Nazi regime, the rehabilitation of the triangle risks glossing over the horror of the Holocaust.

I stood before a T-shirt shop in the heart of Greenwich Village, New York. There, hanging in the window was a white T-shirt emblazoned with a tree. Within the tree a pink triangle dangled like a leaf from a branch. Beneath the graphic, the designer inscribed: 'The family tree stops here.' This specific attempt to embrace comically an alternative to conventional heterosexuality struck me as tragic as the ever-homophobic Nazi Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the SS, who exclaimed, 'We must exterminate these people root and branch... the homosexual must be eliminated' (Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, p 99). Apparently unaware that gay men (and lesbians) can procreate through the sexually uncomplicated procedure of intercourse, Himmler depicted the homosexual man as a 'traitor to his own people' who must be

'rooted out' for his failure to reproduce. Consciousness of the Holocaust fades. Amnesia cloaks the distasteful irony of contemporary jest.

First adopted by American gay men in the early 1970s after the Stonewall riots of 1969, the pink triangle is now promoted by many as an international symbol of gay and lesbian pride and liberation. In a political culture that Americanises history, sexualises dominance and is undeniably imperialistic, this should come as no surprise. Here I explore the history associated with this symbol and argue against its use as an affirmation of gay identity more generally and lesbian identity in particular. Because the pink, down-turned triangle served as a distinctive emblem of Nazi heterosexism which signified and even hastened the destruction of gay men, I argue that it should be abandoned as

a positive symbol for the movement. Like all Nazi symbols, the pink triangle is unregenerate. Moreover, the lesbian adoption of pink triangles conceals the specific struggles associated with being lesbian by conflating the experiences of lesbians with those of gay men.

As Julia Penelope notes: 'Our invisibility, even to ourselves, is at least partially due to the fact that our identity is subsumed by two groups: women and gaymen' (*Call Me a Lesbian*, p 48). Consequently, the truths of lesbian (hi)story and present being often dissipate because lesbianism itself, autonomously, is rendered socially unthinkable. This condition is exacerbated by the gender-neutrality of queer politics. Lesbians have lost their autonomy (i.e., their 'lesbian nation') and, not coincidentally, their distinctive symbol of pride. The lavender two women symbol is nearly extinct.

It is unseemly that girls and women long taunted by forced pink, feminine identifiers are now, as lesbians, to believe that a pink triangle signifies gendered rebellion. Failure to critically assess this situation contributes to an ever-increasing inability to distinguish between those strategies and associations that enhance visible integrity with those that seek to destroy it.

Pink triangle: gay identity

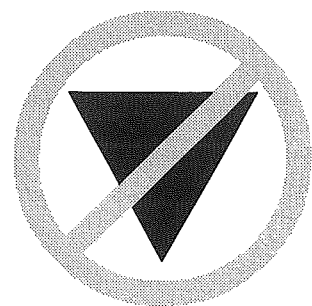
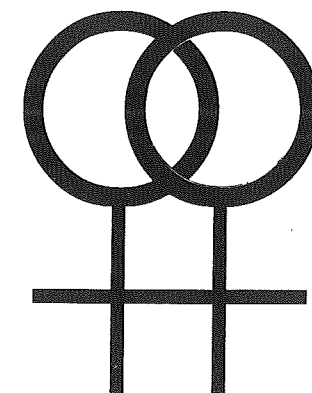
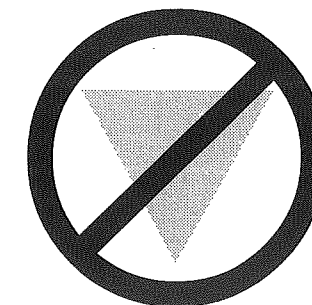
The Third Reich used myriad colored triangles to classify the various groups of peoples they interned in concentration camps. The selection of this emblem was not insignificant. For Hebrews, the triangle was a symbol of truth. Within cosmic, geometric symbolism, triangles symbolise connection between heaven and earth. In the Greek sacred alphabet, triangles represented the vulva of the 'Mother Delta'. It is understandable, given the Nazi's contempt for truth, Jews, and all that is female, that the Third Reich used the triangle, *down-turned*, to denigrate those whom they forced to wear it.

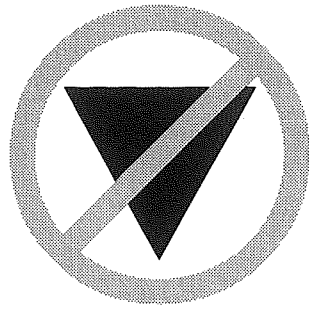
The colours of the triangles were as follows: red for political dissidents, green for criminals, purple for Jehovah's Witnesses, blue for emigrants, brown for Gypsies, black for lesbians and other 'anti-socials', and pink for homosexual men. The pink triangles symbolised the femaleness of this group of detainees whose masculinity was diminished within the context of Nazi heterosexism. Jews, by contrast, were marked by six-pointed, yellow Stars of David within which the word 'Jew' was inscribed. Jewish gay men were forced to wear a yellow

triangle beneath the pink one. From this combination, the six-pointed Jewish star of David was formed. Additionally, Jewish communists wore the yellow triangle beneath the red and so on.

Pink triangles identified the thousands of gay men who were sent to concentration camps as '175ers'. Researchers estimate that between 5,000 to 15,000 gay men died in these camps. This figure does not include those who were interned and later released. The number 175 refers to the paragraph within the penal code, adopted in 1871, that criminalised male homosexuality. The law was later broadened by the Nazis in 1935 to include any form of 'lewdness' between two men. This meant that the slightest display of affection was a crime for which the 'criminal' was to serve six months. After 1936, homosexual men were deported to concentration camps, and while at no time were they sent en masse, as gay men, to the extermination camps of Auschwitz, few survived the concentration camps. Still, the persecution of gay men was never methodical. Unlike Jews, whose religious affiliation was routinely noted on birth certificates, or leftists, whose political sympathies were determined by party lists, gay men were not as readily identifiable. More importantly, in countries conquered by Nazis, gay men comprised the only group exempt from outright extermination. Equating gay men with weakness, Himmler believed their presence expedited the demise of conquered communities. Consequently, non-German homosexuals were often not punished as their German counterparts were. Indeed, during the Olympic Games of 1936, some Berlin gay bars were permitted to reopen and police were ordered not to bother foreign gay visitors.

The regime's reaction to male homosexuality was not uncomplicated. Although male homosexuality was vigorously denounced and out(ed) gay men usually paid the penalty with their lives, homoeroticism was a central component of 'male bonding' within the Reich's all-male paramilitary organizations. When complaints of blatant homosexual behaviour within the SA reached Hitler, he stated that the private lives of officers 'cannot be an object of scrutiny unless it conflicts with basic principles of National Socialist ideology' (*The Pink Triangle*, p 61). It was only when the SA proved unruly that Hitler demanded the killing of his gay SA chief Ernst Röhm and the immediate





expulsion of other gay men from the SA and the Nazi party. Nonetheless, homoeroticism continued to characterise the nationalist propaganda that fuelled the movement and valued gay male artists even lived under security extended to Nazi officials. Moreover, even the interactions that Hitler had with his immediate subordinates were tinged with an element of the homoerotic. Hermann Göring once said of Hitler, 'Every time I face him, my heart falls into my trousers' (Dorchen Leidholdt, 'Where pornography meets fascism', p 21). Throughout the reign of the Third Reich, many distinguished gay men lived undisturbed in Germany while thousands of others perished in concentration camps.

The Nazis did not unanimously regard male homosexuals as biological degenerates. Many believed that homosexuality was a contagious, though curable, social disease. Indeed, barely two per cent of those found guilty of being gay were considered 'incorrigible'. 'Re-education' provided a possible cure for the majority of others. This meant compulsory visits to brothels. There the Nazis forced lesbians, Jewish and Gypsy women into sexual slavery and watched to determine if the '175ers' had been sufficiently cured. Castrations and injections of testosterone were also used to 'convert' gay men to heterosexuality.

Black triangles: Lesbianism obscured

The fact that the pink triangle is regarded as a symbol of gay and lesbian liberation is disturbing because pink triangles were exclusively worn by those men the Nazis had identified as gay. Lesbians freed from the risks of other stigmas (e.g., being Jewish) remained exempt from prosecution. This was not the result of a greater acceptance of lesbianism. Rather, love between women was so intolerable that lesbian existence had been vociferously denied. Measures to criminalise lesbians were considered in 1910 but abandoned as feminist opposition proved politically effective. Consequently, paragraph 175 never extended to lesbians. Gay men were, and are, conceived as exclusively synonymous with 'homosexual' and publicly persecuted as such via criminal proceedings; contempt for lesbians, then as now, was expressed through concealment.

The most effective way to render lesbians powerless was to sever their connection(s) to other women. With the rise of Nazism, lesbian

meeting places and private homes were raided and their visibility was obscured. Thereafter, actions against lesbians abated as almost all efforts focused on the extermination of European Jewry. Prior to 1939 lesbians were among those imprisoned as 'asocials', a broad category applied to all people who evaded Nazi rule. These detainees were considered socially maladjusted. All asocials were identified through black down-turned triangles.

It is politically significant that the asocial category was not exclusively lesbian; it was a diverse grouping that included prostitutes, vagrants, murderers, thieves, and those who violated laws prohibiting sexual intercourse between Aryans and Jews. Precisely because the asocial group was so heterogeneous, lesbians were not as readily identifiable as were gay men whose pink marking exclusively signified their homosexuality. Universalizing the pink triangle today renders lesbians almost as invisible as the black triangles did in the past. Failure to appreciate this obscures some vital aspects of fascist history.

Even within the newly established Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC one is unable to find any accurate information on lesbians. The *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* is accessible via the museum's computer center. Search commands involving the word 'lesbian' execute the release of information that focuses exclusively on male homosexuals. The pink triangle and paragraph 175 appear on screen as if one could assume that both the triangle and the law extended to lesbians. At a time when Holocaust deniers readily prey on any errors and use them to explode the credibility of scholarship concerning the Holocaust, one must be exceedingly careful with the facts.

In an attempt at historical accuracy, some lesbians wear black triangles. It is understandable why a lesbian, possessing a desire for historical precision, might wish to regard herself as the descendant of black-triangled women as distinct from pink-triangled men. Yet, this is an unsatisfactory solution because the issue of historical accuracy is inextricably linked to an ethical question that is too rarely asked, and impossible to answer definitively. Still, that question, put simply, is this: Is it not unethical to suggest that a symbol whose horrific use has denoted the destruction of a group of people be claimed as a symbol of liberation? And, what might it be like for survivors to witness the sight

of what to them is so brutal a symbol? While young gay men and lesbians have the luxury to put on and take off the symbol of hatred that the pink and black triangles represent to many of us, those who have survived the camps cannot erase the tattooed numbers from their skins. They are as permanent and painful as the memories that cannot be extinguished.

The yellow star and the Jewish community

The Jewish community does not wear yellow stars. That is not because anti-semitism has been exhausted. Rather, the Jewish community rightfully rejects for itself anti-semitic emblems and labels. The community is very much aware of the politics of symbolism.

In the first stages of anti-semitic policy, the Nazis insisted on undoing assimilation. The Zionists, by contrast, insisted that anti-semitism be countered by Jews asserting their identity with pride. In response to the first organised ban on Jewish businesses on Boycott Day, April 1, 1933, Zionists insisted that Jews wear yellow stars. Robert Weltsch, editor of a Jewish newspaper, urged his readers to wear the star and 'Wear it With Pride'. This slogan was specifically directed against the assimilationists, whom the Zionists blamed for betraying the Jewish community. In turn, assimilationists blamed Zionists for their persecution. They asserted that Zionists, who insisted on their distinctiveness as Jews, were an obstacle to peaceful co-existence with gentile Germans. In bickering over whom to blame for their subordination, these Jews failed to seriously consider that the anti-semitic stood at the root of their dilemma. Six years after Weltsch had issued his statements on stars, the Nazis compelled all Jews to wear them.

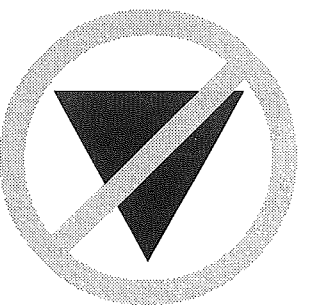
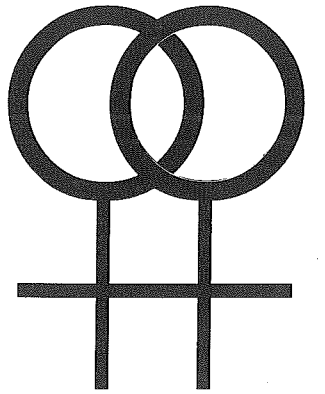
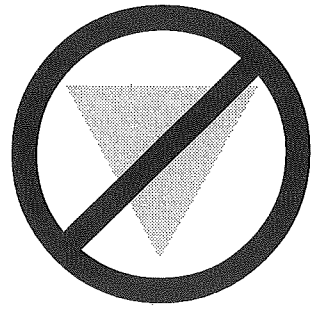
In hindsight, Weltsch later stated that he would have never suggested that the badges be worn had he been able to anticipate the developments. Ironically, the star facilitated the enforcement of residence and movement restrictions for Jews. It was an additional control measure that permitted police to detain any Jew, anywhere, at any time. More importantly, such identification paralysed the Jewish community. Constantly identifiable and scrutinised, Jews became more docile and responsive to Nazi orders than ever before. This, the Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg suggests, was the most devastating function served by the yellow star.

The politics of reclamation

It is incongruous that those pursuing liberation can reflect upon the past and insist, as Robert Weltsch could not, that any Nazi symbol can be used with pride for the purpose of liberation. With the exception of gay men, no other group that has survived the camps has proudly claimed the identifier that denoted their demise. Yet, unlike any other persecuted group, the requests of gay men to be commemorated as the victims of Nazism has gone largely ignored. This is not because historians dispute their victimization but because most seem indifferent to it. While the refusal to acknowledge Nazi tyranny against gay men is inexcusable, embracing the symbols of such persecution is likely to offer affirmation only among those ignorant of or careless with the past. Indeed, the adoption of such symbols might have the unintended consequence of concealing rather than promoting consciousness of the Holocaust. Many who wear and/or display the triangles possess little, if any, accurate information about the Holocaust. Still fewer appear to know about the particular history of the triangles. One of the greatest appeals of this symbol may be its obscurity and not the revelation of its historical significance. Stated simply, the pink triangle is a 'discreet' and politically safe (i.e., gender neutral) signifier for those caring little about the survivors and the (Jewish) communities that may object to its being worn.

Far from promoting an understanding of the past, the gay male movement has appropriated and utterly commercialised this Nazi symbol. The pink triangle is now used as an artsy backdrop to promote gay owned and operated businesses. Those whose aspirations are more political have similarly trivialised the past. Claiming the symbol to highlight current injustices is crass. It implies that gay men and women share a similar history of state-sponsored genocide on the North American continent. Consequently, all bigotry is reduced to a horrifying and simplistic uniformity. That the Holocaust involved a state and political movement dedicated to the destruction of a people is conveniently overlooked; Jewish memory is desecrated.

The feminist philosopher and Holocaust scholar, Joan Ringelheim, asks: 'Can we so blithely reclaim and make right what has caused so much oppression without some careful



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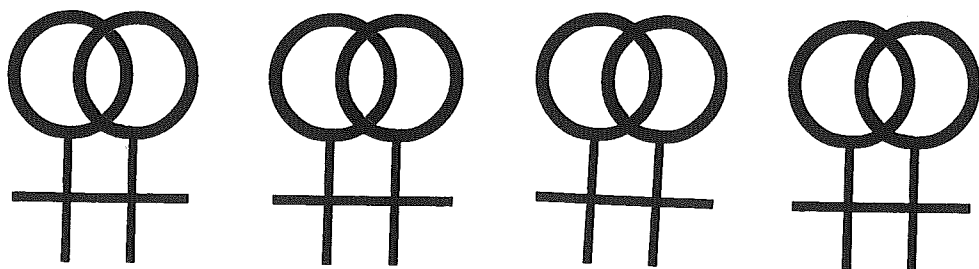
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scrutiny of our motives and politics?' She considers the use of words like 'kike' and 'faggot' to suggest that attempts at 'reclamation' cannot be accomplished 'without retaining some of the negativity that infests and infects the oppressor's use of the words' ('Women and the Holocaust', p 386). Similarly, I claim that the 'transformed' pink (or black) triangle cannot be altered through 'reclamation'. The down-turned triangles never really belonged to those marked by them in the way that 'reclaiming' would suggest. Furthermore, in using them as a commercialised symbol of pride one is implicitly promoting a denial of their horrific dimension. Consequently, wearing Nazi triangles may even be interpreted as a form of Holocaust denial.

Why not, instead, adopt the symbols of life and love rather than sadism and destruction? Why has the rebellious colour become pink and not lavender? Why not two male symbols or two women's symbols? The answer, in part, may be historical ignorance. It may also be internalised heterosexism; the willingness to embrace the very symbols of one's destruction reflects an incredible degree of hatred and self-contempt. In



UCG WOMEN'S STUDIES CENTRE REVIEW Volume 4

Defining the Political—Women's Networks and Politics—Ulster Women's Unionist Council—Feminism and Nationalism in Ireland—Obstacles to Peace and Human Security—Experiences of Beijing—Galway Travellers: New Perspectives on Citizenship—Women and Citizenship—Employment: Norway and Ireland—The Prostitution of Sexuality—Violence: the Galway perspective—Rural Women: Expression, Voice and Movement—Feminist Moral Psychology—Women and Dance—Kate Wolf: Book Reviews

November 1996, ISBN 0-9519466-3-3/ISSN 1393-3612, IR£8

an age of AIDS, historical amnesia and outright denial, it is frightening that the current identifiers are symbols from a period of death and totalitarianism. Despite efforts to the contrary, the triangles cannot be extricated from their use in concentration camps. Attempts to decontextualise this past run counter to the struggle to remember. And, in the absence of a past, opportunities for liberation are lost. Only through the rigours of memory is any community afforded a will to dismantle the pernicious conditions of the present.

One cannot effectively eliminate oppression by mimicking the language, actions, and symbols of the oppressor. To best avoid what Ringelheim calls the 'valorization of the oppressor', we need our own spaces, language, and symbols if we are ever to claim a future that is markedly different from the past. In 'repackaging' the cruel symbols of Nazism, we do not transcend the parameters established by them; rather we delude ourselves into thinking we have control — we become complacent and perhaps complicitous in our own undoing. □

A Question of 'Why?'

Joan Scanlon reviews *Antonia's Line*, the latest film by Marleen Gorris, director of *A Question of Silence*.

A Question of Silence (1983), the first film by Dutch filmmaker Marleen Gorris to be distributed abroad, is one of the few films feminists agree about. This response seems not to depend at all on how much of the detail of the film they have remembered; it comes down to a shared recognition which matches the apparent intention of the film in that it scarcely needs articulating. We all recognise and identify with the experience of the women in the film; we all laugh with those women at the total incomprehension of men, within and outside of the film, who are struggling to find a motive for the murder. The victim is a shopkeeper who 'just happens' to be a man, a man who just happens to be exercising his petty power over one of these three otherwise unconnected women.

Broken Mirrors, a later film by Gorris, was even more uncompromising in its treatment of men. Set largely in a brothel in Amsterdam, the film leaves no single male character free of suspicion; none of them survive this chilling cinematic treatment of male violence without being implicated in a culture which condones the torture, abuse and sexual exploitation of women. Initiating a newcomer into the harsh wisdom of the brothel, a more experienced prostitute warns: 'Even the nice ones are nasty'. The central male character has been stalking a woman who he abducts as she leaves her children in the school playground; for the rest of the film he keeps her hostage, visiting constantly to take photographs of her. We see the back of his head as he drives along, listening as news coverage of her disappearance is broadcast on the radio; we see his hands tidying the pencils on his desk at work, straightening the knives and forks as he waits for his wife to serve his dinner. We never see his face: he is your boss, the man next door, the man in your own home — in short, he is Everyman.

Great expectations

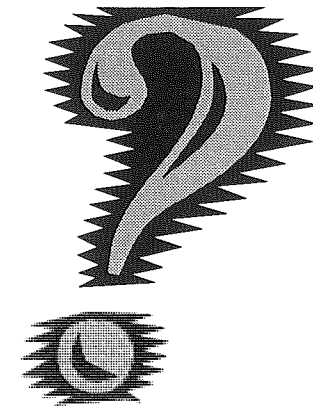
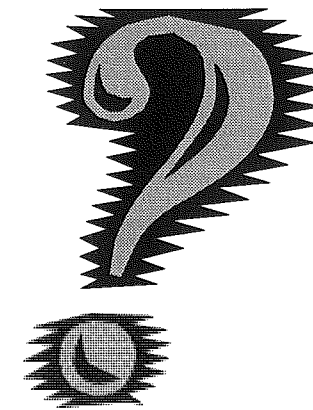
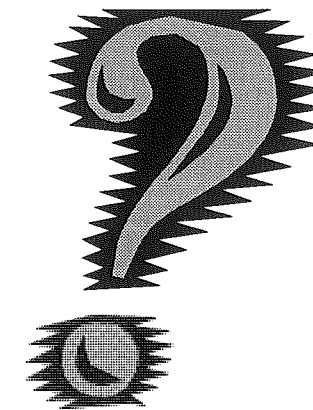
No wonder then that we heard with amazement that Marleen Gorris's latest film, *Antonia's*

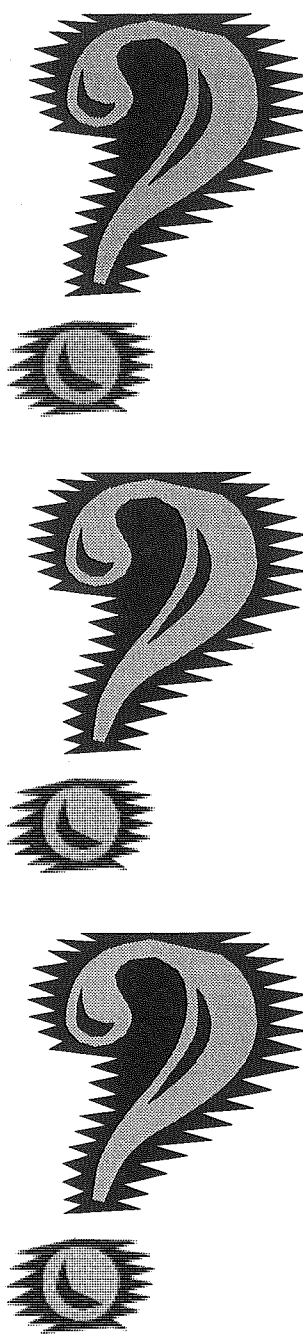
Line, had won an Oscar for the best foreign language film of the year. Our expectations grew as we heard that she had held a women-only showing at the Cannes film festival (followed by a women-only dinner) to the intense vexation of male journalists and critics. It was intriguing that, in spite of all this, she had won an award for a film which was being previewed as a feminist film about male violence and women's resistance. According to the early reviews, *Antonia's Line* was a film about four generations of women who had constructed a life in opposition to the hypocrisy and brutality of their village community. Critical acclaim for the film might have led feminists to wonder if Marleen Gorris had adopted a slightly more liberal approach; we had notice of the fact that (to the evident relief of the critics) there were at least two nice (if slightly ridiculous) men, which demonstrated that some of the species were redeemable.

The choice of a Belgian rural setting might also have given us grounds for concern. It is hard to think of any acclaimed foreign language film in this pastoral genre which does not deal with the great clichés of sex, death and reproduction or which fails to place the human drama within the framework of the natural cycle of life as it manages, however violently, to renew itself with miraculous determination. Marleen Gorris seemed therefore to have set herself a particularly cumbersome and obstinate set of conventions to overturn this time.

Searching for the politics

What is baffling and dispiriting is that, search as we might, there is no evidence in *Antonia's Line* that the filmmaker had any real intention of dismantling these conventions or the values they embody. Certainly, male violence is continuously present — and condemned — but the implications for the women who are abused are never pursued. They seem either to take this level of violence for granted, or to get over it remarkably quickly, and go on to have sex and





reproduce as if their fulfillment depended on it. In so far as one can identify any politics in the film at all, they seem to lie in the belief that women's 'power' resides in their reproductive capacity, although this in turn depends on their ability to harness male sexuality to that end.

The cast of female characters encompasses Antonia herself, a robust Matriarch who struts about on a cart-horse instilling reverence (or lust) in the male villagers; her daughter Danielle, an artist who hires a James Dean look-alike to impregnate her and then becomes inanely infatuated with Lara, her daughter Therese's school-teacher; the 'Mad Madonna', insane with frustrated desire, who howls at the moon; the 'simple' Dede, child of an abusive and violent family, disturbingly presented both as victim and comic character; Therese, Danielle's daughter, a mathematician who is ridiculed for having no maternal instinct.... The list of female cameos goes on, reflecting in their weaknesses and idiosyncracies, Antonia's omnipotence.

In fact, the only character it is remotely possible to identify (or sympathise) with as the plot moves inexorably from one generation to the next is Crooked Finger, a disaffected, despairing and rather grubby old man who finally gives up on the whole enterprise and commits suicide, having no meaningful place in Antonia's world of ploughing and mating.

The other 'nice man' in the film, a widowed farmer, lusts after Antonia and wants her as a mother for his five sons. She offers him companionship instead, in a rather edifying display of self-reliance, but this neo-feminist moment is forfeited when his devotion finally pays off and she agrees to having sex with him once a week in a purpose built shed. Even this is supposed to demonstrate Antonia's strength, since the contract is made on her own terms, but it graphically underlines the way in which men are necessary to all the women in the film, even Antonia herself. For we are told, in a voice over, that at this point: 'Love broke out everywhere', and we are subject to a (thankfully brief) collage of various heterosexual couples fucking, (with a rather chaste image of Lara and Danielle kissing thrown in for the sake of inclusiveness).

Pointless tableau

This is just one example of how the insistent and authoritative narrative voice repeatedly deludes us into thinking that somewhere, at some point, we will be able to make sense of this otherwise pointless tableau of mating with its unexplained background of rape, violence

and death. At one point, when Dede and Loony Lips ('the village idiot') pair off, the narrative voice announces: 'And so, Antonia drew like to like'. Their wedding is then presented as a kind of parody, a PG Tips advert in which the characters are seen to imitate the social rituals of 'normal' people. Later, when the focus is on the childhood of Antonia's granddaughter, we are informed: 'Even in these enlightened times, Therese was raped.' What on earth do either of these statements mean? They are presented with such solemn certainty that we cannot help but wonder what the hell has happened to the director of *A Question of Silence* and *Broken Mirrors* in the intervening years. Do we live in a world where rape is any less frequent? Are we supposed to find disability hilarious? Are we supposed to be celebrating marriage? God knows.

It may be that Marleen Gorris is here intending to present us with a strong, humane (and essentially 'female') response to the brutality of everyday life in a rural community. It may also be that she intends to demonstrate the gendered nature of that brutality and pose us with a moral dilemma: At great length and at gunpoint Antonia curses the man who raped both Dede and Therese, but it is the village men (those who are in her thrall) who beat him to a pulp, and it is his own brother who drowns him. Yet, throughout, she glosses over the incidents of male violence that she has chosen to portray; all of them serve one purpose — to demonstrate the power and influence of Antonia. Moreover, these episodes are often the pretext for humour. In no single case are we offered the perspective of the woman who has been violated. So, after the rape by her brother, presumably not for the first time, Dede is seen smiling in Antonia's pew in church, wearing a new pair of bright blue spectacles, while her abuser winces with his bandaged hands and crotch (Danielle impaled him on a pitchfork when she discovered the rape). And later, after the village priest is caught abusing a woman (visibly distressed) in the confessional box, the film moves straight to a scene where the priest from his pulpit is forced to admit (through a parable) that he too is now at Antonia's mercy.

The only sense I can make of all this is that male violence is understood to be so ubiquitous and inevitable that it is not worth commenting on, and we should focus instead on women's strength and autonomy. Even in this perspective, however, it is hard to find any of the extraordinary, uncompromising clarity that made Marleen Gorris's earlier films so exhilarating. □

This review is largely based on conversations with Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Louise Donald and Jane Taubman.

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