Lesbianism and Erotica in Pornographic America

Charlotte Bunch

A key issue among women working against pornography has been the exploitation of lesbians in pornography, and the suppression of true lesbian art, erotica, and culture in our society. Charlotte Bunch addressed these issues in a speech she gave at the March on Times Square in November 1979, organized by Women Against Pornography. This is a reprint of that speech.

We are here today to demand and to organize an end to violence against women in pornography. But we are also here to ask some questions of America: What kind of society is it that calls love and affection between two women perverse, while male brutality to women is not only considered not perverse but made profitable? What kind of society is it that takes a child away unwillingly from a loving mother simply because she is a lesbian, while another child can be used by her parents to produce child pornography? What kind of society is it where the lifelong partnership of two women has no standing in court, while a husband can batter and rape his wife under protection of the law? You can add to the list—it is endless.

It is a pornographic society; America is a pornographic patriarchy. We are here to say it is not the kind of society that we want. We are here to say that it is going to change; we are demanding better of America. Last week at the National Gay Rights Rally in Washington, over 100,000 people marched to demand better of our society. We demanded the right to control our bodies, including our sexuality, and we demanded an end to social degradation and violence against lesbians and gay men. Today, many lesbians are here marching again to demand that same right as women—to control our bodies and to protect all women from the violence of pornography. The demands
of these two rallies are two sides of the same coin. Both are about the absolute right of all people: to the dignity of our sexuality, to the control of our own bodies, and to an end to all forms of violence and degradation against us.

I was once asked to speak on the topic "Why Lesbianism Is Natural, Healthy, and Good." Yes, that was the title they gave me. I realized that there was only one way to answer: To ask instead, "What kind of society makes such a topic possible?" And the answer was the same as the answer I speak about today: patriarchy. The issue is how patriarchy is unnatural, unhealthy, and bad for women, for children, and even for men. And nothing highlights that issue more clearly than the violence against women that masquerades as sexuality in pornography.

Lesbians are tired of having our love labeled "pornographic," while the real pornographers go free and make money off all women's bodies and oppression. Lesbians know what love, sex, and eroticism of the female body is: We know it and we love it. And we know that it has nothing to do with pornography, which is based on woman-hatred, not woman-love. Indeed, it is only in woman-hating pornography in which men exploit lesbianism for their own ends, that the portrayal of lesbianism becomes okay to patriarchy. Lesbian love is for ourselves, for women. It is abused precisely because it is outside of male control; the label "pornographic" is used against lesbianism just as the term "dyke" was used against feminism—to frighten women and to give men greater control over their lives. All women, lesbian and heterosexual, must reject the association of lesbianism with pornography.

Lesbians are tired of having our love, our culture, and our publications threatened by these labels of "perversion," and we will continue fighting for our right to proclaim and portray our love and our sexuality openly. But we will not be intimidated into silence about the real perversions of pornography—the perpetrators of violence and hatred against women—by the fear that we will be called "pornographic" if we oppose them. We will not be pushed into a closet of blindness toward pornography and the culture it thrives on. Lesbian oppression is a part of that same pornographic culture, and bringing lesbianism out of the closet is not contrary to; but goes hand in hand with, exposing the woman-hating basis of most pornography.

We have seen the exploitation of lesbian love in pornography. We can tell how phony are the lesbian scenes in which our reality is distorted to fit male fantasies and to contribute to the male consump-
tion of female sexuality. As lovers of our sex and our sexuality, if we had even one quarter of the money that goes into pornography, we could produce some genuine erotica about lesbian love, portraying the real beauty of women and of women loving women for ourselves, not for men. And I promise you—there would be a difference. Our productions would have nothing in common with woman-hating pornography.

Some people ask: Where do you draw the line? But every woman that I know, lesbian and heterosexual, can draw the line. We can tell the difference between eroticism and anti-female pornography. We don’t all like or respond to the same things sexually, but we do all know the distinction between eroticism, which celebrates our sexuality, and pornography, which degrades us.

In seeking to change society’s view of women and of the role of pornography in our oppression, feminists can and must begin to draw some lines. If a Ku Klux Klansman says that he gets off at the sight of a lynching or a burning cross (and, given the links between sex, racism, and power in our society, some probably do), do we therefore label his reaction as sexual rather than violent and racist? Do we “tolerate” it simply as “freedom of sexual expression”? I hope not. Yet that is precisely what snuff and thousands of other forms of pornography do regularly to women.

Male control depends on the appropriation of all sexuality, and this, in a woman-hating society, means men retain the right to degrade and do violence to women. Yes, women can draw lines between eroticism and degradation, and it is time that we did so publicly.

Finally, pornography is not just symbolic violence against women. It is part of an international slave traffic in women that operates as a multinational corporation, where our bodies are the product, often procured unwillingly and always abused. Our fight against violence in pornography in its widest implications is therefore a global fight. It extends from local street actions to the United Nations, where reports on the slave trade in women have been covered up for decades. In fact, that cover-up makes Watergate look like peanuts.

As in all international struggles, we begin in our own streets, and nowhere is that more appropriate than here on Forty-second Street—Times Square—the pornography capital of America. We begin by reclaiming our bodies and our sexuality for ourselves. We begin by demanding that a society which punishes us for loving ourselves and each other, and then deems our bodies for the profit of men, must
change. We begin by no longer tolerating a pornographic and hetero-
sexist patriarchy in any of its aspects. We begin by drawing lines and
fighting back and organizing. We begin by calling on America to do
better—to take violence and degradation out of so-called sexuality
in order to discover fully and celebrate the joy and eroticism of female
sexuality.