



**ACPL ITEM  
DISCARDED**

Dorothy Allison

# My Dangerous Desires

a queer girl dreaming her way home

Amber L. Hollibaugh

## **Desire for the Future**

### *Radical Hope in Passion and Danger*

*By late 1980 I'd moved to New York City to be with a lover—and almost immediately found myself embroiled in what came to be known as the sex wars. This article was first given as a talk at the infamous Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1981, at which radical antiporn feminists picketed against my participation. (Others were picketed, too, notably Gayle Rubin, Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison, and other butch/femme- and s/m-identified lesbians.) This conference would go down in history as the iconic catalyst for polarization between different elements in the feminist movement—the antiporn versus the anticensorship groups; the sexually androgynous feminists versus those of us who came out of the old-gay butch/femme tradition; the “vanilla sex” advocates versus the practitioners of s/m. This is also the first article I ever really sat down to write.*

When I was ten, I found a set of Xeroxed pages showing 236 positions for sexual intercourse. Later that day I met three of my girlfriends in the field behind my house and stared at those pictures. It was a solemn, hysterical occasion. We studied those images, desperately trying to understand how anyone could enjoy doing what those pictures suggested. Looking first at a picture, then down at our adolescent bodies, we asked, “Do you suppose he puts it in there?” We were in that field till late afternoon, and when everyone else left, I got sick. I threw up for fifteen minutes. Sex and penetration were horrifying ideas. I knew that one day some man would expect me to be the woman in those pictures. I swore I wouldn't be.

Every time I see pornography or hear a woman describe something she enjoys sexually that I can't imagine liking, I feel myself slipping back to that field to stare at those Xeroxed pages again, and I am struck by the extraordinary price women must pay to explore their own sexual questions, upbringing, and experiences.





*(left) Me leaving San Francisco for New York City in 1979-80,  
photograph by Honey Lee Cottrell;*

*(above) me at an early gay pride march in New York City  
with Lucy Lloyd;*

*(below) me and Dorothy Allison in Brooklyn in her  
back yard, in 1984.*







*The Hardwick Supreme Court protests  
in Washington, D.C., 1987 and my arrest,  
photographs © 2000 JEB  
(Joan E. Biren)*



*Esther Newton and me when we were first together, in a shot taken for the Barnard Sexuality Conference booklet that the university tried to confiscate*



*Esther and me in Cherry Grove (above), and with our dogs*



*Me in 1992*



*Me in 1994, taken for POZ magazine*



*My lover, Jenifer Levin,  
photo by David E. Franck*



*Ken Dawson (Executive  
Director of SAGE — Senior  
Action in a Gay  
Environment), Eli Zal and  
me at a SAGE board retreat*

Women in this culture live with sexual fear like an extra skin. Each of us wears it differently depending on our race, class, sexual preference, and community, but from birth we have all been taught our lessons well.

Sexuality is dangerous. It is frightening, unexplored, and threatening. Women enter a discussion of sexuality in many different ways. Our histories and experiences are different; the ways we express those differences (and define them politically) are extremely varied.

Many of us became feminists because of our feelings about sex: because we were dykes or we weren't, because we wanted to do it or we didn't, because we were afraid we liked sex too much or that we didn't enjoy it enough, because we had never been told that desire was something for ourselves before it was an enticement for a partner, because defining our own sexual direction as women was a radical notion.

But, in all our talking about sex, we have continuously focused on that part of our sexuality where we were victims. Our rage, which had given us the courage to examine the terrible penalties attached to being female in this culture, had now trapped us into a singularly victimized perspective. Our horror of what had happened to us made it impossible to acknowledge any response other than fury at the images and acts of sexuality surrounding us.

It is painful to admit that the main focus of our feminist sexual theory has been aimed primarily at pornography, as easy to justify as it is deeply feminine. Good women have always been incensed at smut. Our reaction went far beyond disgust at pornography, at its misogyny or racism; we were also shocked at the very idea of explicit sexual imagery. At heart, our horror at pornography is often horror at sex itself and reflects a lesson all women carry from their earliest childhoods: sex is filthy.

But looking at the danger and damage done us is only a part of coming to terms with sex. We should also begin to look at sexuality itself and at what we mean by words like *desire*, *passion*, *craving*, and *need*. Do we think that sex is socially constructed? Is there any element of biology influencing or defining aspects of desire? If we think of sexuality as a combination of language, consciousness, symbolism, pleasure, and motion, then how does that fit with our real lives as sexual women? What do we share in common; why are we each sexu-

ally different from one another? Should we attempt to wipe the sexual slate clean and begin again? Could we if we wished to? Do we desire what is forbidden? If the forbidden is connected to taboo, how can we resist oppression without destroying our means to excitement? What is the connection between the erotic and danger, the erotic and comfort? What creates the need to “fuse” temporarily with a partner during sex? What are the options created by imagining a separation between sex and gender? What are the dangers? Is there feminist sex? Should there be?

It is important to keep in mind that we’re not discussing sexual abstraction but creating the atmosphere and opportunities for ourselves in bed. Our theories affect the way we feel sex today and shape what we consider talking about with each other as well as what we will go home and try. This discussion will change the sensation of our orgasms as well as the way that women in the future will experience their own sexual feelings. The way each of us was raised lies close to the surface of sexual desires, and the explanations we explore today will have the same effect on the women who follow us.

We will never open up women’s futures if we censor the dangerous material of this debate before we have begun. We are in grave peril if we edit out of our analysis all women whose sexual histories do not correspond to a “correct” notion of feminist sex. At this moment, we have gone further than just removing experiences and people that don’t fit comfortably within our picture of the sexual universe; we have also attempted to slander and quiet those women whose intellectual ideas disagree with or challenge the prevailing attitudes in the women’s movement about sex. Those of us who have helped create a feminist movement in order to resist not only sexual violence against women but also sexual stigma, censorship, and repression, who fought to expand more sexual options for women, have found ourselves outside feminist standards, political integrity, and moral authority and have grown silent in our meetings, consciousness-raising groups, and feminist journals and papers.

How have we gotten to this point? Do we, as feminists, truly believe that pornography is the major issue facing all women at this time? Do we believe that if we managed to wipe it out, many other aspects of our oppression would crumble as well? In the struggle against pornog-

raphy, are we creating new definitions of sexual sickness and deviance? Who are all the women who don't come gently and don't want to; don't know yet what they like but intend to find out; are the lovers of butch or femme women; who like fucking with men; practice consensual s/m; feel more like faggots than dykes; love dildos, penetration, costumes; like to sweat, talk dirty, see expressions of need sweep across their lovers' faces; are confused and need to experiment with their own tentative ideas of passion; think gay male porn is hot; are into power? Are we creating a political movement that we can no longer belong to if we don't feel our desires fit a model of proper feminist sex?

Feminism has always had trouble expressing the radically different ways that oppressions bear on women, just as it has a terrible time facing the idea of sexual differences among women, straight or gay, working class, Jewish, Third World, young, old, or physically different. It is one thing, for example, to speak of the double or triple oppression of working-class and/or women of color but another to reckon with the actual realities of working life. It may make much more sense to spend eight hours stripping than working in a dry-cleaning plant or as a licensed practical nurse or an office worker taking home \$132 a week. Sex work may offer a woman not only more money but a greater sense of power. Contrary to popular middle-class beliefs, working in a peep show is not the end of the world. The sex industry and its surrounding communities are often more socially and economically desirable than the jobs or groups of people that form the alternative.

I have always been more ashamed of having been a dancer in nightclubs when I've talked about it in feminist circles than I ever felt in my hometown, working-class community. There are many assumptions at work behind feminist expressions of surprise and horror: I must be stupid, or I could have done something better than that; I must have been forced against my will, or I was just too young to know better; I have prefeminist consciousness; I had a terrible family life; I must have hated it; I was trash, and this proved it; and, finally, wasn't I glad I'd been saved?

I hear the sentiments endlessly in the feminist movement, distinctions that confuse the reasons for making different choices and what they mean in women's lives. Sex is not the same for all of us, and a movement that is primarily white and middle class (or includes

women who aspire to middle-class values) cannot afford to decide who or how women are made victims in a sexual system built on class and race mythologies equally as damaging and vicious as sexist ones. The Man has many different faces, some of them female and white, and our alliances are not automatic or clear-cut.

It is fortunately, the idea that sexual variation, that difference, could be the key to analyzing sexuality and desire, a way of untying the stubborn knots of a bitterly heterosexist culture, has yet to appear distinctly enough in our theorizing about sexuality. As simple an action as patting somebody's ass may have widely different meanings depending on family, culture, time, race, and expectations. When a woman looks at a picture of a man and a woman fucking, doesn't it matter if she is straight or gay, likes cocks or thinks they're awful, was raised a Catholic in a small town in Minnesota or was the only Gypsy child in her community? Doesn't that have a deep and radical impact on what a woman considers pornographic and what she considers sexy? Or are we to believe that there is a "natural" reaction that all women have to sexually explicit images, one that warns us immediately if and when those images cross the line to lewd?

People fuck differently, feel differently when they do it (or don't), and want sex differently when they feel passion. We live out our class, race, and sex preferences within our desire and map out our unique passions through our varied histories. These are the differences that move the skin, that explode the need inside a cunt and make sex possible. Women are always made to pay on either side of the sexual dialectic. We live terrified of harassment or attack on the street and in our homes, and we live terrified that other people will discover our secret sexual desires. Much is forbidden even to women's imaginations. We are deprived of the most elementary right to create our images of sex. It is a hard truth that far too many women come up blank when they are asked what their sexual fantasies look like. Sexual fantasies are the rightful property of men, romance the solid female terrain. Yet most of our ability to act on our desires rests in the possibility of imagining the feel and smell of the sex we want.

When I was younger, I tried to control my imagination more strictly than my sex life; my mind scared me much more than the actual things I was doing in bed. No one had ever told me that I could

explore fantasy without ever going further than dreaming. I really believed that if an image rested at the corners of my mind, giving it center stage would inevitably lead to doing it. So every time I dreamed of fucking fur, not flesh, I was horrified. I worried I might still dream of fucking a man, that I would betray both lesbianism and feminism by dreams of penetration, power, and of being overwhelmed. And I panicked when I thought of my mother (and of this desire for her as my lover) or of the multilayered worlds full of desert islands, baby bottles, whips, pleading voices singing for the right to seduce me, winds that whistled between my thighs. At heart, I was much less afraid of how men might imagine me in a pornographic picture than I was terrified of how I might paint myself inside a sexual drama. In my mind, at least, I wanted, needed, to try everything I could think up, needed to see where my own sexual imaginings would take me, and needed to read and experiment with images and materials that excited or alarmed me. Instead, my terror of the unconscious in my own sexual fantasy life was unremitting. I spent too many years struggling against what I was afraid would surface if I let myself go. It was a deeper closet than the one I had been in before I had come out as a lesbian.

It is a bitter irony to me that I was in my mid-thirties before someone explained to me that I was not what I dreamed, that fantasies had a reality of their own and did not necessarily lead anywhere but back to themselves. I had never understood that I might be deeply fascinated by an idea but not enjoy it at all if I actually tried it, that fantasy could give me a way to picture different aspects of my own growing sexual consciousness (or explore my lover's) without going any further. It would also allow me a freedom unhindered by the limits of my body or the boundaries of my conscience. In my life I need monogamy, but I am free to experiment with an army of lovers in my fantasy. In a particular sexual sequence I may have only one orgasm, but in my mind I am capable of infinite climaxes and paths to satisfaction.

I am often shocked by my own sexual world. It is much denser and more forbidden than I knew. But it is also richer and has helped me find the beginnings of the words that might make sex of the body as complex and satisfying as my dreams of it. It has begun to give me back the sensation in my body that had been lost for years.

By providing a distinction between love and sex, fantasy also al-

lowed me to begin breaking my addiction to romance. As a child, I often dreamed about sex, about being pushed down a hill beside our house, tied to a tree, captured by deep-voiced lovers. (My lovers, as children, often dreamed another thread of this theme, being the girls who grew penises, who became Errol Flynn, the pirate taking the women he desired.) As I began to fear these fantasies, I also began to work with feverish energy to rearrange my sexual dreams into a romantic scenario, the rightful arena of sex of a woman. I did it well. I was “swept off my feet,” not captured; held closely to a devoted lover, not bound to her bed; and properly married to anyone I fucked (or at least you could hear their begging for my hand in the background). I filled my dreams with men, trying desperately to organize my fantasies correctly.

I was on the run from my own desires. I was angry and afraid of the feelings that were alive in my body. I felt driven between my wish to be a decent, reasonable woman and an equally powerful wish to throw all my beliefs and upbringing away and explode into my own sexual raving. I thought I would go mad with it. Like women in centuries before me, I feared sexual insanity, feeling that my lusts would lead me further and further from the communities I wished would accept me — middle-class intellectuals, Marxists, and, later, feminists — and into the underworld of passion which would envelop me.

By the time I was seventeen, I had begun to seek out these unnamed cravings. Against all precaution, I drove myself into crazier and crazier sexual situations, the more forbidden the better. I was burning up. There has never been a time when I was in more sexual danger than then, a time when I sought to forget my desire and act on it at the same moment. But it is always dangerous to refuse the knowledge of your own acts and wishes, to create a sexual amnesia, to deny how and who you desire, allowing others the power to name it, be its engine or its brake. As long as I lived afraid of what I would discover about my own sexuality and my fantasies, I had always to wait for another person to discover and “give” me the material of my own desires.

Each time we have been afraid of our own desires, we have robbed ourselves of the ability to act. Our collective fear of the dangers of sexuality has forced us into a position where we have created a theory from the body of damage done us. We have marked out a smaller and smaller arena for feminists to be sexual in and fewer actual ways for physi-

cal feelings to be considered "correct." By recognizing the dangers of our circumstances, we have said, "There is no way to be a woman in this culture and be sexual, too. I will live first with the anger and then hope we can change enough about the world that the women after me may be safe enough to fuck. For now, it will have to be enough." But this isn't enough, and we know it. We have settled for an easy way out of the terrible problem we face. We have accepted a diminished set of alternatives and become paralyzed by the fear.

But there is another way, a way that's more difficult and demands that we take a riskier stance to define and act on our desires. We can begin to reclaim our rights to fight, to experiment, to demand knowledge and education about sex. We can begin in another spot, saying that there is too much we don't know yet to close any doors that a woman enters to try and capture her sexual feelings. We can say that our sexuality is more complex than the things that have been done to us and that we gain power through our refusal to accept less than we deserve. We can dare to create outrageous visions.

The borders are shrinking, and fewer women feel that they can reconcile their sexual desires with their political beliefs. We must live with the danger of our real desires, give them credit and airing. We must demand better contraception, self-defense classes; decent, non-judgmental sex education; the right to control our bodies and set new boundaries of female experimentation and self-knowledge. Feminism should be seen as a critical edge in the struggle to allow women more room to confront the dangers of desire, not less. By selecting our truths, we have censored the hearts of our own future as sexual people. Every history of desire that we have refused to acknowledge has removed us a step in an attempt to unravel and reclaim the daring of our sexual selves. Each judgment has scaled down our own ability to fuck and our desperate need to explore why we feel the desires we each call our own.

The truth is that our current state of feminist affairs has demanded that women live outside power in sex. We seem to have decided that power in sex is male because it leads to dominance and submission, which are in turn defined as exclusively masculine. Much of our theorizing has suggested that any arousal from power felt by women is

simply false consciousness. In real life this forces many feminists to give up sex as they enjoy it and forces an even larger group to go underground with their dreams. For the many women who have no idea what they might eventually want, it means silencing and fearing the unknown aspects of their passions as they begin surfacing. Silence, hiding, fear, shame—these have always been imposed on women so that we would have no knowledge, let alone control, of what we want. Will we now impose these on ourselves?

The assumption that women don't need fantasy is just as devastating to a woman's sense of power and pleasure in sex as assumptions that we don't "need" sex really, only men do. And the idea that the fantasies of women are the same as, or merely derivative or in the service of, male values only serves to belittle our already shaky beliefs about our own sexual importance. No matter how sex is played out or with what gender, power is the heart, not just the beast, of all sexual inquiry.

It is the undertow of desire between my lover and myself that propels me through all the "good" reasons I can invent to stop myself from wanting sex. It is erotic tension that ignites the wildness of my imagination and the daring to figure out how to make my desires feel against the skin as I imagined them beforehand. With these, I let go, finally, to another woman's direction and sexual need for me and find ways to crack through my lover's defenses and push her further. I want to be unafraid to be the erotic person I created in my own fantasies as a twelve-year-old girl, dreaming that someone would at last make me scream because it felt so fine. I want to let go, to compel my desires into an experience of my body that awakens me, satisfies me, finally, and doesn't leave me angry and bitter that yet another woman was too afraid of her own passion to push against mine and see how far we could have gone.

Sometimes I want to play, resist, fight against another woman sexually; sometimes I want to surrender. I can't imagine sex without this. In the end, I don't want to do away with power in sex, like a part of the feminist movement; I want to redistribute that power and knowledge so I can use it (and use it better) for myself and my partner. I think that there is a way to confront sexism and racism within sex without erasing the sources and intensity of our pleasures. Doing it side

by side doesn't guarantee that sex is free of any fantasy of power, and refusing to experiment with elements of our desires leaves us all the more terrified of our right to sex and satisfaction.

We must say we want sex and set our own terms. We must build a movement that validates the right of a woman to say yes instead of no, a movement that thinks we haven't heard enough about sex rather than too much and which reclaims an eroticism not defined by a simple political perspective or narrow vision which insists on excluding women to sustain its standards. We are searching for ways to examine sexuality, consent, and power. We want to expand what we understand about sexuality so that more of us can live the desires we envision. We must start from where we are right now, from the real bodies we live in, the real desires we feel.

There are four prerequisites for that possibility: (1) the right to discuss openly the shapes and images of our own desires, recognizing how class, race, and sexual preference influence the scope of the discussion and our conclusions; (2) the right to take sexual risks without also risking our right to a secure place within the feminist community; (3) the need to educate ourselves with the best available information about all aspects of human sexuality and have that material available in our own institutions, bookstores, and community centers; (4) the obligation to use, then go beyond, personal insights and histories to create a body of sexual theories as complex as each one of us.

Feminists must enter the fight again, angrily, passionately. Feminism cannot be the new voice of morality and virtue, leaving behind everyone whose class, race, and desires never fit comfortably into a straight, white, male (or female) world. We cannot afford to build a political movement that engraves the sexual reactions of nineteenth-century bourgeois women onto a twentieth-century struggle.

Instead of pushing our movement further to the right, we should be attempting to create a viable sexual future and a movement powerful enough to defend us simultaneously against sexual abuse. We must demand that our pleasure and need for sexual exploration not be pitted against our need for safety. Feminism is a liberation movement; it needs to fight with that recognition at its center. We cannot build a movement that silences women or attempts to fight sexual abuse isolated from every other aspect of our oppression. And we can never af-

ford to build a movement in which a woman can lose her reputation. Feminism must be an angry, uncompromising movement that is just as insistent about our right to fuck, our right to the beauty of our individual female desires, as it is concerned with the images and structures that distort it. This goal is not an end in itself but a means which will ultimately determine the future and direction of our desires. As feminists, we should seek to create a society limited only by those desires themselves.