Wanting Pictures After Feminism: Re-reading *On Our Backs*

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between photography and feminism that emerges through the pages of the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* (1984–2006). The San Francisco-based magazine represents an exceptional archive of images made in the context of lesbian community. Returning to the photographs that were published in early issues of the magazine, the article argues that *On Our Backs*, whilst explicitly addressed to a paucity of available images of lesbian culture, reflects a complex engagement with the meaning of the photographic image in dialogue with contemporaneous feminist debates. Through the work of Tee Corinne, Morgan Gwenwald and Honey Lee Cottrell, a desire for pictures renders the image a site of fantasy in which different ways of inhabiting lesbian identity form in dialogue with a community of readers.

Keywords: lesbian, feminism, photography, periodicals, desire

'I don't quite know what it means to want a picture', hesitated Judith Butler when she reviewed five lesbian sex magazines for Gay Community News in the heat of the summer of 1984 (Butler 1984: 3). Each publication, including *On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian*, *Bad Attitude: A Lesbian Sex Magazine*, *Cathexis: A Journal for S/M Lesbians*, *Outrageous Women: A Journal of Woman-to-Woman S/M* and *The Power Exchange: A 'Newsleather' for Women on the Sexual Fringe*, had launched in the first six months of that year, a remarkable fact since few titles explicitly dedicated to

the subject preceded them. The editors of these magazines reasoned that new platforms for Sapphic sexuality were necessary in order for lesbian feminism to advance out of the 1970s, the decade in which the movement had been established. But they also acknowledged theirs to be a troublesome undertaking. 'What are nice dykes like us doing making a magazine like this?' asked the editors of *Bad Attitude* thus signalling the made-for/made-by-lesbians ethos of the publications and the tenor of feminist debate that they contributed to (Hoffman and Patton 1984: 2).

Contemporaneous feminist debates about sex—so charged that the period came to be known as the 'sex wars'—made Butler's review more difficult than she had anticipated.[1] 'I had to take long pauses, walks even, to try to come to terms with a deep knot in my stomach that developed as I read' (Butler 1984: 3). The knot that Butler felt tells us something about the knottiness of this recent feminist history. The anxiety that representations of sex, particularly those of a Sadomasochistic flavour, might be the undoing of lesbian feminism conflicted with the promise that new ways of representing lesbian desire would renew feminist politics.

Photography, stock-in-trade of the pornography industry, was often a focus of these debates. Of all the magazines that Butler reviewed, it was *On Our Backs* that had, as she put it, 'the advantage of fleshy photos' (Butler 1984: 3). The first issue of the magazine included a tongue-incheek adaptation of the Playboy centrefold, introducing the photographer Honey Lee Cottrell as 'bulldagger of the month'. On this image—a self-portrait—Butler became unstuck. 'I don't quite know what it means to want a picture…What if the woman's a racist?' she worried, her anxiety exposing the potential limitation of a political project that relies on images (Butler 1984: 3). Conversely, for the editorial team of *On Our Backs*, who worked

[1] 1 In the early 1990s, Mandy Merck, Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter and others wrote extensively on this period of feminist debate within the emergent field of queer studies. See, for example, Merck (1993), and Duggan and Hunter (2006).

closely with Cottrell, the appearance of images that read as lesbian was political as much as it was pleasurable, indeed because it was so. Images were a means to address the paucity of representations of lesbian experience in mainstream culture. But also, the magazine attended to what the editor's characterized as the elision of sexuality within lesbian feminist politics. Invested in both the photographic medium and magazine format as a means through which a community might see itself, also at stake was role of desire in lesbian feminist politics.

A New Era in Lesbian Publishing

The Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco is synonymous with the countercultures that blossomed in the 1960s. In 1966, it was also the home of Maud's, a bar that, until its closure in 1989, numbered among the oldest lesbian venues in the US. There, butch and femme working-class couples nestled at the end of a long bar and hippie dykes could be found clustered around a juke box in the second of two low-lit rooms.[2] It was on nearby Cole Street that Myrna Elana and Debi Sundahl first conceived of *On Our Backs* in the small Victorian apartment that they shared. From there, they imagined a magazine that would serve a dispersed network of lesbians internationally, a community that had gained greater visibility—not to mention members—as a result of the strengthening of feminist bonds in the 1970s.[3]

A snapshot of the first editorial team accompanies a review for the magazine that appeared in B.A.R. Bazarre, the X-rated supplement of the Bay Area Reporter. Published in 1985, the newsprint image shows Sundahl and Elana alongside Nan Kinney, Sundahl's partner who would eventually

[2] Sue Ellen-Case, who wrote a play about Maud's, describes her first visit to the bar in an essay on butch identity and lesbian style in the 1960s and 1970s (Ellen-Case 1998).
[3] Jill Johnston, the journalist, and author of Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution, describes how, prior to the Stonewall riot in 1969, lesbian identity did not exist as a broadly unifiable category. Thus she argues that only after the advent of the modern Gay Liberation Movement were many able to identify as lesbians (Johnson 1998).

share the role of publisher, and Susie Bright, the writer whose career began at high school editing the Left-wing paper *Red Tide*. Also pictured are L. A. Hyder, the American-Lebanese photographer who worked as administrator for the first three issues and went on to establish the organization Lesbians in the Visual Arts in the early 1990s, and Susan Xtrom, a design consultant. All six are laughing—Hyder with her head thrown so far back that you can only make out her jaw line. Feminists, butch and femme lesbians, leatherdykes, poets and artists, graduates of Women's Studies programmes, sex workers and revolutionary Marxists, a roll call of the early editorial team reflects the surprisingly broad roots from which *On Our Backs* grew. The magazine launched in July 1984 as part of annual Gay Day celebrations that mark the anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Like the parade, or a busy night at Maud's, the publication described a space in which myriad expressions of lesbian identity could converge.

Perhaps you don't need me to tell you about a first encounter with *On Our Backs*. Published until 2006, the magazine is neither among the most marginal objects of lesbian culture nor the oldest (though I came to it too late to seriously qualify as an original reader). A friend recalls buying the inaugural issue. Requested from a worker at a feminist bookstore, it was brought from behind the desk in a brown paper bag. The bag was a practical solution, a concession to feminist discord and contemporaneous state censorship. It obscured the magazine's jacket, on which is printed an image of an androgynous figure. Shot from behind, a leather coat slides from her shoulders to reveal a muscular back. The portrait by L. A. Hyder is bold but it is not explicit. Only the leather jacket, at the time a highly charged symbol associated with the codes and proclivities of S/M, alerts the reader to the intention of the magazine. That, and the relatively high production values of the journal; as Dianne Gregory wrote for B.A.R. Bazarre, 'until recently lesbian sex journals have consisted of a few newsletters advertised in the

back of gay and women's publications, but with the advent of On Our Backs…a new era in lesbian publishing has begun' (Gregory 1985: 13).

Aspirations to contribute to a burgeoning magazine culture are clear from the first issue. Listed in the contents are features, fiction, photography, poetry and personals. Bright's column 'Toys for Us' pioneered frank and innovative writing on the subject of sex. Joan Nestle, one founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York, and Judith Stein, who worked with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective responsible for *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1970, contributed fiction. Along with these writers, the inclusion of a short story by Jewelle Gomez, then editor of Conditions, the New York-based periodical committed to publishing working-class and Black lesbian writing, situate the magazine within an existing national network of feminist publishing. *On Our Backs* was partly financed through advertising. Adverts that appear in the first issue show it to have emerged into a nascent lesbian economy, one that already included sex shops and erotic portrait studios, leatherwear suppliers and club nights. There's even an ad for a promotional hankie. Whatever your colour—red for fist fucking, lace for Victorian scenes or mustard for food fetishes—a purchase indicates a commitment to the new magazine. Small ads, letters pages and personals all reflect the networks through which print ephemera circulates but also, as Martin Meeker has written, helps to establish (Meeker 2005). *On Our Backs* was a labour of love for the editorship who funded it through stripping and subscriptions as well as advertising.[4] A community endeavour, the magazine offered 'sexual freedom, respect and empowerment for lesbians' to readers internationally (Elana and Sundahl 1984: 3).

Images that Read as Lesbian

[4] In her essay 'A "Labor From the Heart"', Jan Whitt discusses a number of lesbian feminist periodicals published throughout the twentieth century including *The Ladder*, *Focus: A Journal for Lesbians* and *Sinister Wisdom*. She quotes Lisa Ben, who edited *Vice Versa*, an early dyke magazine, 'I gave it to my friends, because I felt that it was a labor from the heart, and I shouldn't getany money for it' (Whitt 2001: 235).

From the outset, *On Our Backs* was dedicated to artistic expressions of lesbian sexual identities. To this end, photography was central, a means to work against a paucity of available images and to engage in a 'long' history of lesbian representation (Elana and Sundahl 1984: 3). Images were used to illustrate articles and advertise goods and they were included as discrete features. Of the image-makers for whom lesbian community was also an education in photography, many developed their careers in dialogue with On Our Backs. Del LaGrace Volcano's (then Della Grace or Della Disgrace) particular brand of social documentary was forged in dyke bars, giving way to an increasingly conceptual approach that framed sexual scenes and associated queer subjectivities. Leon Mostovoy's (then Tracy Mostovoy) aesthetic was disposed to a manifest sensuality whereas Jill Posener, the British playwright and photographer who became the firstnamed photo editor of *On Our Backs*, explored the political dynamics of sexual identity in public space despite a self-confessed 'sense of modesty' (Posener 1994: 44). Annie Sprinkle staged encounters between the visual language of pornography and classical portraiture whilst Cathy Opie's images reflect an intimate world of lovers in what Helen Molesworth once described as 'articulations of longing for others, for community, for solitude' (Molesworth 2009). The disparate styles of these photographers correspond with the variety of content that the magazine medium facilitates.

Looking at pictures in magazines is not like reading other kinds of printed ephemera although many histories of photography are also histories of print. For dykes, as with other historically marginalized groups, grassroots publishing served as a singular space in which images taken by, of, and for, the community could circulate. Though it responded to a paucity of representations of lesbian sexuality in existing feminist periodicals, early editions of *On Our Backs* reveal the magazine to be the beneficiary of lesbian feminist visual cultures that emerged in the 1970s. This is evident

with the inclusion in the first issue of a montage by the US photographer Tee Corinne. The cover of the magazine opens onto a close-up of a vulva, which is integrated into the trunk of a tree using analogue printing processes. The illusionary effect of Corinne's picture provokes a double take. It is an opening onto a world in which desire is organized against the dominant psychoanalytic tropes, for example in both Freudian and Lacanian theories, of patriarchal lineages and phallic signifiers. Leading with Corinne's image, the editors of *On Our Backs* acknowledged that the magazine was indebted to the project that photographers like Corinne began in the 1970s. 'Together we explored ways to make images that read as lesbian', wrote Corinne in 2006 of her collaborations with Cottrell (Corinne quoted in Brownworth 2015).

Reading as a lesbian is a practice that often confronts, and is confronted by, absence. Absence renders reading a form of detective work, a kind of searching that seeks to uncover, or recover, either by looking for clues, engaging methods of over-interpretation or, as Amy Villarejo writes, the desire to read an object 'even, sometimes, against the will of those who created it' (Villarejo 2003: 3). A network of individuals and spaces facilitated the inception of a lesbian photography in the 1970s, contributing to an emerging feminist 'counter-vision'.[5] This evolved through workshops like the photography ovulars, so-called in opposition to 'seminars'. Hosted on women's land in rural Oregon by the organization Rootworks, these sessions inspired a group to establish an early feminist photography journal called *The Blatant Image*. This was a period in which histories of lesbian photography were written, in print but also through slide shows such as Joan E. Biren (JEB)'s 'Lesbian Images in Photography, 1850–present'. In turn,

[5] 'Countervision' was the title for a 1982 feminist photography project that included contributions from Cathy Cade, Joan E. Biren and Barbara Hammer among others. Related material can be viewed at the Human Sexuality Collection, Cornell University, where the archives of Susie Bright, Honey Lee Cottrell and *On Our Backs* are also held.

publications such as Coming to Power, a groundbreaking volume compiled by the lesbian S/M group Samois in 1981, and *Sapphic Touch: A Journal of Lesbian Erotica* hitched the issue of lesbian representation to that of lesbian sex.[6]

A political endeavour, the experimental methods employed by photographers such as Corinne in their pursuit of images that read as lesbian also responded to material constraints. Techniques like solarization or abstraction through montage allowed Corinne to circumvent issues of anonymity and address constraints surrounding the publication of explicit images. Quoting the artist, Jan Zita Grover argued that the resulting photographs represented a displacement of 'sexual feelings onto acceptable symbolic replacements so as "to afford some measure of privacy"' (Grover 1989: 184). In this way, the legibility of lesbian images was very often contingent on context despite the ambitions of the photographer to produce an image that was uniquely lesbian. *On Our Backs* responded to restrictions in feminist publishing and sought to introduce increasingly explicit images to readers. Along with Corinne, the first edition of On Our Backs includes work by many photographers engaged in making lesbian erotica in the 1970s, for example, Fran Roccaforte and Katie Niles. The most explicit pictures to be published in this first issue are a series of images by Morgan Gwenwald, a New York based photographer who was a founding member of the Lesbian Herstory Archive. Her photographs often reference the highly coded languages of leather culture. The images featured in *On Our Backs* 1 show two models naked and fucking, their faces obscured. 'Incorrect View of the Beloved' is shot from between the legs of a model, indicating the role photographers often took in the intimate scenes they photographed. Printed for the magazine, Gwenwald's images are overlaid, somewhat awkwardly,

[6] Both Corinne and JEB were involved with both the Rootworks project and *The Blatant Image*. For a detailed account of 'Lesbian Images in Photography, 1850–present' see Hackett, 2015.

with poems by various authors including by 'Maggie the Top', a pseudonym that Bright published her poetry under. One full-page reproduction is titled 'even femmes go down', which must have spoken to Bright who also did the layout for these pages. 'I scream a new language in / writhing. ecstasy' wrote Madrona Berries in her poem 'Gallant Lover', a line that could well describe Gwenwald's approach to image-making, a photographic practice forged from the excesses of lesbian desire (Berries 1984: 28).

Contemporaneous reporting demonstrates the excitement that the appearance of the magazine aroused but also the criticism it met from lesbian feminist circles. Liz McKenna, the Senior Editor of Penthouse's *Forum*, was effusive. 'Bored with the sexless rhetoric of most lesbian/feminist journals, some daring San Francisco daughters of Sappho have launched the rawest and most graphic celebration of lesbian lust we've ever seen' (McKenna 1985: 10). Yet 'cruising' *On Our Backs* in July 1985, Denise Kulp remained ambivalent. 'Now we have lesbian-oriented pornography to take the place of a lesbian/feminist erotica which only barely exists' (Kulp 1985: 16). In fact, the inclusion of photographers who were associated with lesbian feminist visual cultures of the 1970s and early 1980s in the pages of *On Our Backs* challenges the divisions that both McKenna and Kulp make along generational lines. The attempts of those artists to develop visual languages for lesbian desire coalesced in *On Our Backs* and its sister magazines, which manifested the latent desires of some lesbian feminists. Where once Corinne had trouble publishing images, by the mid-1980s her images were so ubiquitous that, as a colleague once joked, they were pinned to the bedroom wall of every woman that she slept with. It was, Corinne reflected, 'only with the arrival of On Our Backs and her sister publications that I've found a place for many images that I have treasured, but never shown' (Corinne 1989: 26).

Photographs are Trouble

In the fifth anniversary edition of On Our Backs, a portfolio of images showcases some of the 'pioneering erotic photographers' that the magazine published in its first five years, including those mentioned throughout this essay. A brief introduction to the feature reads: photographs are the trouble making part of [the magazine]. They are controversial; they generate extreme reactions. Why do photographs have that power when words do not? What do they reveal about the photographer and models, our readers, or about lesbianism on a larger scale? Why do people get so upset and others turned on? ('Pioneering Erotic Photographers' 1989: 23)

Why indeed? Responding to *On Our Backs* in 1984, a reader from Washington DC protested that 'for years we as lesbian-feminists have been fighting male pornography…it shocks and abhors me to find that women have stooped to the same methods of selling' (Donna 1984: 2). A signed letter reproduced in the established feminist newspaper off our backs, from which *On Our Backs* took its name, railed against the inclusion in the younger magazine of 'photographs of dildoes and women wearing dildoes, including a dildo going into a vagina' (Rachel et al. 1985: 29). The authors signed off 'we think it's important that Lesbians protest the growing acceptance of these male and het values that are so Lesbianhating and that are co-opting our Lesbian Movements' (Rachel et al. 1985: 29). Responses like these show how, in the mid-1980s, lesbian feminist values were negotiated in dialogue with representations of lesbian sex. The reason that certain lesbian sexual proclivities became a linchpin for broader feminist discourse has been explored extensively by Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin and Carol Vance to name just a few writing at the time from an anti-censorship feminist standpoint (Califia 2000; Rubin 2011; Vance 1984). 'This turbulence is symbolic of a much deeper, more invisible and less-than-direct ideological power struggle', reads the introduction for *Coming to Power*:

anti-S/M attitudes are embedded in many areas of lesbian-feminist ideology. As S/M lesbians, we say that our experience contradicts many of those closely held theories…Because we have some fundamental disagreement with existing theories, anti-S/M lesbian feminist theorists correctly perceive us as a threat, but we are only a threat insofar as we are a threat to their status (Samois 1987: 8).

Given the ideological fissure described in *Coming to Power*, stark distinctions between anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions are inevitable. Yet they also threaten to reduce the complexity of these debates. While *On Our Backs* was established in the context of the leatherdyke community—Elana and Sundahl were both members of Samois and both involved in editing its newsletter—it also grew out of a wider network of feminist print, including publications that were hostile to S/M practices. An early advertisement for *On Our Backs* appeared in the final Samois newsletter in May 1983. The header is literally torn from off our backs, the two 'f's of 'off' inked over to make the new title of the new magazine. Discussions about what images were included in On Our Backs did not only take place among the readership. They were also debated between the editorial team and the photographers that they worked with. In an interview with Bright and Posener in 1995, Katie Niles describes how she often felt her images were too 'vanilla' for *On Our Backs* (Niles, Bright and Posener 1995: 11).[7]

An earlier conversation between the editors and photographer Sean Reynolds, published in the third issue of the magazine, distinguishes between erotica and pornography. 'Erotica for me has nothing to do with

[7] The group that published *On Our Backs* were not solely interested in publishing and also utilised video, producing pornographic shorts and features. Whilst working on the magazine, Sundahl and her partner Nan Kinney established Fatale Video. They utilised new home video technologies to become one of the largest distributors of lesbian porn, producing titles such as *Shadows* (1985), *Clips* (1988), *Suburban Dykes* and *Bathroom Sluts* (both 1991). Cherry Smyth reviewed the lesbian pornography that was burgeoning at this time, taking in what she described as its banal S/M scenes, the thrill of the mock penis and, finally, the promise of a 'filmic practice that explores the gap between identity and fantasy'. See Smyth 1990: 159.

nudity or attractiveness, but rather a particular feeling that's been created. That's why so many things are erotic', Reynolds responds, continuing that 'porn is sleazier, it's…dripping. I love porn, I love the willingness to do it, although I don't think I've ever created it myself' (Reynolds and 'the editors' 1985: 28). Definitions of erotica and pornography were often debated between feminists at the time, so much so that Grover suggested that the distinction was itself a product of the sex wars (Grover 1990: 21). As Reynolds's comments suggest, On Our Backs was not concerned with legitimizing one practice over the other. As such, categories pertaining to erotica and pornography are less hardened then they appear elsewhere in lesbian feminist culture. 'Is violence the difference between erotica and pornography' asked Shelley Anderson in Equal Time in 1985 (Anderson 1985: n.p.). The equation of pornography with violence by anti-pornography feminists served to ratify the distinctions described above. But it also served to orient the photographic images in particular ways, reinforcing a causal relationship between images and the events and objects they depict. So Andrea Dworkin has it in her famous treatise against pornography, when she refers consistently to pornography as a form of violence. 'The persons who produce the image are also weapons as men deployed in war become in their persons weapons' (Dworkin 1989: 25). For Dworkin, as with other anti pornography advocates, the pornographic image, which includes the conditions of production, dissemination and consumption, represent the becoming real of representations of violence. It was on this basis that she and others sought legal sanctions to limit the making and circulation of pornographic imagery.[8] This was a persuasive argument, relying, as Deborah Bright suggested in the early 1990s, on the ability of an image to

[8] This prohibition was enacted through censorship, though not always. Handwritten notes adhered to the copies of *On Our Backs* that are held in the Lesbian Archive at Glasgow Women's Library simply state 'for research purposes only'. Whilst permitting readers access to the magazine, the note nonetheless intervenes in the manner in which the magazine is read, urging research in opposition to pleasure.

'masquerade as compelling evidence of the real, while obscuring their status as (always already) mediated representations' (Bright 1998: 5).

In many ways, the feminist press, a privileged space for dissent, facilitated the myriad debates that earned retrospective coherence as the sex wars. Delivered into an already explosive context, the new lesbian sex magazines acted like torch papers. *On Our Backs* was regularly removed from the shelves of feminist bookstores and Bright's talks were often picketed. Posener and others moved from the UK to San Francisco, finding in *On Our Backs* a tonic to the restrictive environment that the debates had created in London. The editors addressed the debate with humour and they often sent up proponents of the anti-pornmovement. Cottrell even lists 'Dworkin's hair' as a turn-on in the Bulldagger feature. Simultaneously, the magazine endeavoured to cover disputes with seriousness. The intricate dynamics of this episode of recent feminist history play out through letters pages and articles, facilitated by the readership of the magazine and their reaction to the images it published. The exemplary archive of lesbian erotica available in *On Our Backs* is thus richly suggestive of the ways that feminist politics and photography informed one another in the context of lesbian community in the 1980s.

Different Ways of Being a Dyke

If the feminist opposition to pornography is about the becoming real of the depiction of violence, the new erotica published in *On Our Backs* and its counterparts sought to manifest lesbian desire through its appearance. As the editors of the magazine explained in 1989, 'at a time when all expressions of overt sexuality are threatened by right wing and religious dogma—and, regrettably, even feminist censorship—On Our Backs and other erotic magazines stand out as truth tellers' ('Pioneering Erotic Photographers' 1989: 23). This claim to truth first sounds naïve given the critiques of the documentary function of the image circulating at the time. However, many

of the photographers published in the magazine were informed on these contemporaneous perspectives. Cottrell counted theorists like Laura Mulvey among the influences that informed her exploration of the female gaze (Cottrell 1981: 1). The idea of giving truth to lesbian desire also invokes another question, namely of who or what counts as lesbian at all. Or, as Merck once asked succinctly of a different collection of lesbian images, 'whose desire' is implied (Merck 1991: 29)?

The cover of the first anniversary issue of On Our Backs features an image by Cottrell and introduces a photoessay that was an important touchstone for the ways that On Our Backs imagined photography and lesbian identity in its first year of production. The series reflects the entangled issues of identification and desire in such a way as to warrant a longer discussion than I have been able to provide of other photographers throughout this essay. Collaborating with Rachael Williams and 'Elixis', the photographs stage a black, butch and femme-identified lesbian pairing as a site of fantasy. One reader responded to this issue, the first to feature black models on the cover, with a question. 'What the hell took you so long?!' (Christine 1985: 3). Prior to Cottrell's shoot, the two models had encountered one another at the annual Ms Leather contest, a 'truly sleazy, nasty and unbelievably fun' night hosted at Ollies, the lesbian-owned bar in Oakland that was a centre for feminist organizing in the area (Califia in Samois 1987: 278). In 1981, Williams was the first winner of the prize, which was held in a room named Radclyffe Hall—another nod to the lesbian past. The following year, Elixis took the title. Events like the Ms Leather contest at Ollies are part of a history of lesbian community in which black and trans dykes participate. Cottrell's collaboration with the two models is suggestive of the ways that intersecting experiences of racialised, classed and gendered identity enter into accounts of public life through lesbian spaces like Radclyffe Hall. They also indicate how difference, rather than

sameness, was articulated as a facet of lesbian desire in exchange with the photographic image in *On Our Backs*.

'Desperately seeking fantasy lover' reads the caption to an image so that it is made to look like a personal ad. 'Let's meet for the first time, everytime. The carousel spins tomorrow at noon: white lace and uniform'. Throughout Cottrell's photo feature, Williams and Elixis are styled as a butch/femme couple. The reference to pre-Stonewall era signifiers of lesbian identity draws a line through the 1970s. The rejection in that decade of butch/femme identities was largely due, as Joan Nestle writes in A Restricted Country, to embarrassment 'because they had made Lesbians culturally visible, a terrifying act for the 1950s' (Nestle 1987: 101). In the images, a merry-go-round of cultural references keeps turning and Williams and Elixis appear in a restaurant setting, both wearing tuxes. 'Desperately hungry…Wine and women at the Cafe Menage a Trois. Dinner at eight' reads another caption. The scene reflects the influence of the photographer Brassaï on Cottrell, in particular his photographs that document the underground nightlife of Paris. This says a great deal about Cottrell's approach to photography, informed as much by traditions of documentary as it was by studio portraiture. She wished to turn her camera to the street, she wrote in 1981, of which she was part (Cottrell 1981: 14). As well as Brassaï, the legacy of photographers like Berenice Abbott and Ruth Bernhard, for whom she worked for a time, can also be read through Cottrell's work. In this way, she situated herself within a tradition of American photographic modernism to which lesbians had contributed. At a time when many artists and theorists advocated that feminists turn away from the body, and its incumbent pleasures, Cottrell and other photographers associated with *On Our Backs* established the image of the body as a locus of desire.

In another photograph from the series, Williams and Elixis make a getaway on a caboose as though in a Western. Here though, the two are

dressed as leatherdykes and are as much renegades of feminist community as they are heterosexual culture at large. Yet rather than framing an image of lesbian desire around sameness, Cottrell's images of the two women emphasis difference as the desiring part of the butch/femme coupling. Importantly, this exceeds the binaries associated with heterosexual models of sexual desire. Charged with a surplus of subcultural references, Cottrell's images describe numerous possible lesbian identities that might be inhabited through playful citation. Seemingly, the series anticipates the writings on lesbian subjectivity that established it as mode of queer critical inquiry, best associated with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Photography is central to this operation, not because of its evidential properties but rather because the image is rendered a site of fantasy. By allowing multiple expressions of lesbian identity to be performed, sometimes simultaneously, photography is the difference that lesbian desire makes.

After Lesbian Visibility

In 1995, Cottrell explained to Bright and Posener that representing fantasy and documenting community were ultimately contradictory undertakings (Cottrell, Bright and Posener 1995). Cottrell's comments refute a straightforward relationship between lesbian identity and signification. Navigating a space between showing and imagining, Cottrell's images are evocative of the way that photography appears in the early years of *On Our Backs*. Looking at pictures in the context of the magazine produces a queer kind of reading, in which meaning is negotiated between community and the image, a simultaneous play of identification and desire. Reflecting on the conditions that made this work possible, Cottrell wrote in 1989 that her 'photographs are a product of [an] on-going delicate relation between my body, identity and the commercial success of *On Our Backs*' (Cottrell 1989: 25). If lesbian community and photography transform each other through the pages of *On Our Backs*, what was the role of the market? The magazine

was part of an economy in which the financial viability of print publishing was tethered to the politics of lesbian visibility. The ambition of *On Our Backs* to print a publication to rival magazines that catered for non-lesbian audiences came at a price. When it was established the periodical cost $4, a figure that was criticized for failing to take into account the relatively low wages earned by lesbians.[9] Though it is important to note that *On Our Backs* outlasted all of those periodicals reviewed by Judith Butler in 1984, the publication was always constrained by financial pressures.[10] In 1996, On Our Backs filed for bankruptcy and was bought out by the owners of the magazine *Girlfriends*. When, two years later, Deborah Bright assessed the state of queer print culture, she was critical of what she perceived to be a capitalist ethic of individualism creeping into the lesbian movement (Bright 1999).[11] This she attributed to various factors including the on-going effects of both the culture wars and the HIV/AIDS crisis, the expansion of the marketplace and the privatization of public life. Susie Bright put it more starkly when interviewed for the New York Times in 1996. 'In terms of the quality of the lesbian press, you don't have a cutting-edge or an intellectually provocative journal coming out right now' (Bright quoted in Pogrebin 1996).

In early 2017, artists Janina Sabaliauskaite and Jade Sweeting organized the exhibition *On Our Backs: An Archive* at The NewBridge Project, an artist-run complex that occupied a former office block in the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. In many ways a former industrial centre in the North East of England is no stranger place to encounter the

[9] In 1985, the San Diego Gayzette, invited reader responses to the magazine with one employee of a bookstore saying that 'obviously, the people who are complaining about the price are not the ones buying it' (San Diego Gayzette 1985: 12)

[10] This placed material constraints on image production too and the magazine was nearly always printed in black and white. When the publishers did find a colour printer that they could afford, restrictions surrounding content forced them to return to a sympathetic printer and monochrome format.

[11] Deborah Bright edited an edition of the photography magazine *Exposure* in 1994 titled 'Sex Wars'. The collection gathered together the work of various artists engaged in making sexradical images.

material that I have described here than in rural Oregon in the 1980s, or a dyke bar in New York in the 1990s, or, as I once did, a bookshop located behind the car park of a supermarket in a British seaside town in the early 2000s. The principle operation of magazines is, after all, distribution. Their meaning relies on dispersed readerships. *On Our Backs: An Archive* staged an anachronistic encounter with the magazine as an archive, inviting viewers look but also to read. Indeed they showed the pleasure of both to be bound together in this episode of lesbian photographic culture. The curatorial ethos that underpinned the show was intimate and moving and, for some involved in *On Our Backs*, bewildering too for the reinterest it showed. Organizing a large amount of material across two gallery spaces, the DIY ethos of the exhibition restaged the multiple, occasionally competing, articulations of lesbian identity that became available through the magazine. In the political present, it is the articulation of difference as a facet of lesbian desire that seems to draw a new generation to the magazine.

Neither Susie Bright nor Jill Posener worked at On Our Backs by the time they began to work on *Nothing But The Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image* in 1996, the same year that the magazine was bought out by the owners of *Girlfriends*. The book contains many of the images that graced the pages of *On Our Backs* in its first 10 years divided into the categories 'dyke', 'cunt', 'butch' and 'sex'. Organizing material thematically, it charts the influence of an earlier generation of photographers on numerous others. *Nothing But The Girl* includes portfolios by Corinne, Cottrell, Gwenwald and Posener. It also features Claire Garoutte's beautiful images of bodies cut and held by lovers; Phyllis Christopher's sensuous portraits of lovers and friends in San Francisco that evoke Michelle Tea's descriptions of a community in Valencia in 2000 and Lola Flash's images of dykes of colour topping the New York skyline. An early picture by Katie Niles is a joyous full-colour image of fat dykes piled upon one another. One holds a vibrator.

She's a revolutionary, bearing her torch. The mess of tattoos, piercings and straining belts punctuate a profound intimacy, recorded but also forged through the fleshy photograph.

In *Nothing But The Girl*, Bright and Posener do the work that historians writing from the outside of communities cannot, gathering the traces of a culture to which they belonged. Bearing witness to a desire for pictures after feminism—which is not to say without feminism, but rather to understand how lesbian feminism was reimagined through the magazine—the two give testimony not to a lack of images but instead to abundance. The profound achievement of *On Our Backs* and its sister magazines is bittersweet. Bright's comments in the New York Times indicate that the editors knew that the foundations that supported this unprecedented period in the history of feminist photography were in the process of being dismantled.

END

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