

## Retrospective: Tangled Up in Pleasure and Danger

**P**erformativity, intersectionality, and pleasure and danger have been among feminism's most influential keywords. They have provoked debate and disagreement, and, yes, their fair share of "bad readings," too.<sup>1</sup> All three terms involved revisions of second-wave feminism, but in contrast to the others, "pleasure and danger" has been inseparable from the circumstances of its coinage: the controversial 1982 conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" at Barnard College. It was there, at what has long been known simply as the Barnard Conference, that anthropologist and conference organizer Carole Vance advanced the idea that women's sexuality is marked by a persistent tension between pleasure, on the one hand, and danger, on the other.<sup>2</sup> Her argument was elegant and nuanced and rich with historical and anthropological references. It was designed to recalibrate feminist discussions of sexuality so that there might again be room within the women's movement for frank discussions about women's sexual pleasure. Vance took aim at movement shibboleths, particularly easy generalizations about women's soft, gauzy eroticism and men's rock-hard, predatory sexuality. Her address was both an invitation to begin talking honestly about sex and a substantial intervention in the feminist discourse about pornography, which at the time was dominated by the antipornography movement.

This essay takes stock of that intervention, now nearly thirty-five years old. What did Vance's pleasure and danger formulation accomplish, within the academy and activist circles as well as in the larger culture? Where might it have fallen short, at least in practice? Finally, given that the sex wars seem to be heating up again (see Bazelon 2015), might this be the moment for a more substantial reengagement with Vance's couplet?

It is not my aim here to reprise the 1980s sex wars between antipornography feminists and feminist sex radicals. However, assessing Vance's

<sup>1</sup> It was Judith Butler (1992, 83) who, exasperated with shallow understandings of her work on performativity, complained of the many "bad readings" it had accumulated.

<sup>2</sup> "The Scholar and the Feminist" conference, of which this was one, was an annual event sponsored by Barnard College and funded by the Helena Rubenstein Foundation. (After the 1982 conference the Rubenstein Foundation withdrew its funding.) Although there have been forty such conferences, only this one, the ninth conference on sexuality, is known simply as "the Barnard Conference" or just "Barnard." See Jakobsen and Hopson (2005).

influential couplet requires revisiting those contentious, understudied, and often misunderstood times. Well before the Barnard Conference was convened, the feminist group Women against Pornography (WAP) set about recasting it as an alarming exercise designed to supplant an authentically radical feminism with an anything-goes libertarian version of feminism. If you think trigger warnings are a relatively recent development, think again. For WAP, even the prospect of the conference registered like one horrifying trigger event. In the days before the conference, members of the group bombarded Barnard College administrators with phone calls in which they complained that the conference had been planned by “sexual perverts” (Vance 1993, 294). WAP laid plans to picket the conference, and indeed members, decked out in T-shirts that read “For a Feminist Sexuality” on the front and “Against S/M” on the back, showed up outside the conference hall. There they distributed leaflets attacking the conference and specific individuals as “un-feminist.” Under pressure, college administrators folded and confiscated the sixty-page booklet, *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*, which had been intended for attendees. “Perniciously anti-woman and anti-feminist” was how the prominent writer and antipornography activist Andrea Dworkin characterized the *Diary*.<sup>3</sup>

In the wake of the conference, what had been local skirmishes about pornography went national and turned even more combustible.<sup>4</sup> Dworkin, along with legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon, denounced their feminist critics as “collaborators” who were “fronting for male supremacy” (MacKinnon 2007, 266) rather than true feminists.<sup>5</sup> As for the conference, what had been a wide-ranging event tilted toward the academic came to be understood as having been centrally about sadomasochism. Those associated with the conference were presumed to be “pro-porn,” as though their agenda consisted of producing pornographic tapes and better-made sex toys. In fact, what they favored was rethinking feminist orthodoxies. They had two ideas in their sights: that pornography is the linchpin of women’s oppression and that

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is taken from an unpublished memo by Dworkin, circulated in 1981 and reprinted in Rubin (2011, 205).

<sup>4</sup> Some may have found the diary’s punkish graphic design, with its teasingly suggestive images, especially objectionable. According to Elizabeth Wilson’s (1983) account of the conference, Dworkin found the images obscene and disturbing. The diary’s design was a collaborative effort involving Beth Jaker, Hannah Alderfer, and Marybeth Nelson, three graduates of the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Gayle Rubin reprinted Dworkin’s outraged response to the diary in “Blood Under the Bridge” (2011).

<sup>5</sup> MacKinnon’s charge was directed particularly at the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), which had been spearheaded by feminist sex radicals.

women's experience of sexuality is overwhelmingly characterized by their victimization. "Women's actual sexual experience," Vance maintained, "is more complicated, more difficult to grasp, more unsettling" than feminist critiques of pornography allowed (1984, 5; see also Vance 1993).

So why did Barnard blow up? Vance's keynote lecture suggested a dialectical relationship between the two terms, pleasure and danger, and one can deploy that insight to better understand the sex wars. Why was there so little support at that juncture for a politics of sexuality that was about anything other than constraining men's sexuality? Fifteen years earlier, discussions of sexuality, particularly the "Big O," had galvanized the first women's liberation consciousness-raising groups. Abortion had been fought for as a "right," a matter of sexual self-determination rather than as a matter of "choice."

Feminism's growing uneasiness about sexual freedom cannot be disaggregated entirely from the country's rightward turn, which was already in evidence by the late 1970s. By the time of the Barnard Conference it was clear, as Brett Harvey has argued, that the "New Right was zeroing in on sexuality itself, particularly women's sexuality" (1984, 207). That said, sex had long constituted one of feminism's most reliable fault lines. After all, the reemergence of feminism in the 1960s was partly attributable to that era's headlong plunge into pleasure, and on a less-than-level playing field. The sixties assault on sexual uptightness led to sexual epiphanies for both men and women, but for women it also sometimes came at a cost, nullifying their sexual self-determination. In radical and countercultural circles, saying "no" left one open to charges of everything from bourgeois respectability and prudery to counterrevolutionary tendencies. Indeed, it is no accident that feminists' first protests against pornography targeted the radical press, not *Playboy*.

Several years passed between those early protests and feminists' organized crusade against pornography, but the anger about misogynistic smut did not subside, especially with the proliferation of pornography, now plainly visible just about everywhere. By the early 1980s groups such as WAP were on a roll, attracting women across the political spectrum. Nothing else—certainly not the failed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—promised to unite women. As Ann Snitow has argued, the ERA's failure and the antipornography movement's initial success owed something to the country's preference for an ideology of gender difference rather than gender equality (1986, 11–12).

In those years danger trumped pleasure. It was reflected in the initial reactions to the Barnard Conference, which were by no means uniformly

positive.<sup>6</sup> In some feminist circles, even acknowledging that, for women, sexuality might be something other than a site of victimization was tantamount to going over to the dark side. Even those who had doubts about the antipornography movement apparently had greater doubts about the Barnard Conference. One brilliant but conflicted writer admitted feeling sympathetic to a conference attendee who berated academics for “debating the niceties of leather and shit” while ignoring the “real, material struggles of women.”<sup>7</sup> In its immediate aftermath, the antipornography movement picked up steam as moral panics centering on sexuality swept across America. There were charges of child abuse and satanic worship at daycare centers, attacks on artistic freedom and the defunding of “obscene” art work, and the introduction of antiporn ordinances in several cities.<sup>8</sup>

I was the youngest and among the brashest of the featured speakers at Barnard. A onetime lesbian separatist, I was six years into a history PhD program at the University of Michigan when I spoke at Barnard. Reading Ellen Willis’s rebuttals of antipornography feminism in the *Village Voice*; becoming involved in the university’s women’s studies program, where I met brilliant and unorthodox feminists (including Gayle Rubin); and taking part in a local effort to decriminalize prostitution—an effort spearheaded by lesbian sex workers—changed me.<sup>9</sup> So did working as a deejay in a predominantly gay disco. In those days, it was unusual for gay men and lesbians to have very much to do with each other socially, but in that disco, and in others where I danced, that was beginning to change. I grew curious about men with those differently colored and positioned handkerchiefs. For me, the idea that one could easily distinguish the “male-identified” from the “woman-identified”—the terms then most commonly used—in everything from scholarly methodology to sexual preference seemed not just futile but a worrying reinscription of the gender binary.

<sup>6</sup> The most withering coverage of the conference appeared in the Washington, DC-based radical feminist newspaper *off our backs*, which devoted a great deal of its June 1982 issue to the conference. A shade less negative were Deborah Sherman and Harriet Hirshorn (1982). However, there were some appreciative accounts as well, including Byron (1982), Orlando (1982), Pally (1982), and O’Dair (1983).

<sup>7</sup> See Wilson (1983, 40). Wilson identified the attendee as a lesbian prostitute.

<sup>8</sup> On accusations of satanic and ritual abuse, see Nathan and Snedeker (1995) and Beck (2015). The only substantial history of the feminist campaign against pornography is Carolyn Bronstein’s *Battling Pornography* (2011). For a different point of view, see Duggan and Hunter (1995) and Strossen (1995).

<sup>9</sup> Willis wrote a number of articles critical of the antipornography activism, but the first two appeared in October and November 1979 in the *Village Voice*. They were reprinted in *Powers of Desire* as “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography” (Willis 1983).

As controversial as the Barnard Conference was, rethinking sex through the lens of pleasure and danger catalyzed feminist scholarship. Within my own area of women's history, there was already a mounting dissatisfaction with explanations that pivoted on false consciousness and with accounts in which women appeared unfailingly as victims. Post-Barnard, feminist historians increasingly struggled to make sense of their subjects' agency, particularly in the knotty area of sexuality. Pleasure was never meant to be the privileged category in Vance's schema. And it wasn't in Christine Stansell's *City of Women* (1986), Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* (1986), or Judith Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980).<sup>10</sup> In these landmark texts, we discovered women negotiating "the dialectic between necessity and choice" in ways that were sometimes more messy than empowering.<sup>11</sup>

These bracing texts had as their focus heterosexually active women, the women whom feminism most often cast as clueless victims of false consciousness. Certainly, by calling into question the notion that heterosexual women were peculiarly susceptible to brainwashing (Joan Nestle's [1983] "My Mother Liked to Fuck" was one memorable intervention), the pleasure and danger couplet went some way toward restoring agency to heterosexual women. This doesn't mean that Vance's formulation was presumptively heterosexual, as has been suggested.<sup>12</sup> In my view, the emergence of queer studies as a scholarly field is among the most important legacies of pleasure and danger.

Before Barnard, the scholarship on gay men and lesbians was fairly distinct, reflecting the prevailing view that the two groups, particularly when

<sup>10</sup> Walkowitz, who was on the conference planning committee, was ahead of everyone else. Her book was published three years before the conference. Neither Peiss nor Stansell explicitly cites Vance, but Stansell uses the pleasure and danger formulation on page 87.

<sup>11</sup> Here I am quoting from a clear-eyed letter written by the editors of *Powers of Desire*, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (1983). The letter was to Adrienne Rich and concerned her 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which they were reprinting in their anthology. Rich includes the exchange in her book *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986, 68–75). Over the decades, scholars have sometimes shied away from exploring agency when it cannot be framed as resistant. As a consequence, some have asked, are historical agents always empowered and empowering? Can't they sometimes be self-interested and complicit with the powers that be? For a very useful critique along these lines, but one that examines the historiography of slavery, see Johnson (2003). Still, even if scholars have sometimes wielded the concept ungracefully, there is simply no denying the indispensable work that agency has performed.

<sup>12</sup> For the notion that pleasure and danger was presumptively heterosexual, see the call for papers for this issue of *Signs*: <http://signsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Signs-CFP-Pleasure-and-Danger.pdf>. It is true, however, that heterosexual feminists, particularly Ellen Willis, played a role in articulating feminist sex radicalism.

it came to sex, shared very little by way of common ground. This sequestering of lesbians' experience as uniquely, well, "female," was too often then projected onto the past.<sup>13</sup> Post-Barnard, this shifted as feminist scholars increasingly questioned the interpretive model advanced by an earlier (and pioneering) generation that had understood women's same-sex relationships largely through the lens of gender. After all, pleasure and danger, as articulated by Vance, never presumed that the danger was entirely external (1984, 4–5). It could reside in the dark corners of the psychic interior, in the internalized shame of queer desire. Claiming lesbianism on sexual grounds turned out to be field-shifting, as well as sometimes personally transformative.<sup>14</sup> The new prominence of sexuality in lesbian studies shifted attention from romantic friendships to unambiguously sexual same-sex liaisons and in the process provided a critical bridge to the development of queer studies.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The most conspicuous example is Rich's hugely influential "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence" (1980).

<sup>14</sup> See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's germinal article "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America" (1975). It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this essay, which affected in profound ways the field of women's history, and more particularly the emerging subfield of lesbian history. My first substantial paper as a graduate student (Echols 1979) was a critique of Smith-Rosenberg's important essay. Anthropologist Esther Newton brought attention to lesbians and mannish women with "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian" (1984) and her book *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993). Also important in this respect is Lisa Duggan's "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America" (1993).

<sup>15</sup> Of course, I understand that queer studies and queer theory have never approached equal balance in their attention to lesbian studies. This is true despite the fact that when Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "queer theory," she did so provocatively, as a critique of the complacencies that in her view bedeviled lesbian and gay studies, including the extent to which lesbian studies remained an unequal partner in the field. David Halperin (1996) claims that de Lauretis coined the term in 1990 for the title of a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The term was, he says, meant to be "offensive" and was meant to "disturb the complacency embodied by the rubric 'lesbian and gay studies' that 'by now established and often convenient formula' . . . which managed to give the misleading impression that the relation of lesbian to gay topics in the field was well defined, equally balanced, reciprocal, and somehow harmonious both intellectually and politically." It also bears mentioning that Rubin's Barnard paper, "Thinking Sex," is sometimes cited as the founding text of queer theory. In Rubin's view, antipornography feminism's botched handling of sexuality suggested that the best way forward was a radical theory of sexuality, autonomous from feminism. Indeed, Rubin suggested that sexuality would be better understood if not folded into the category of gender, as feminists habitually and understandably had. Rubin's move did prove highly influential until the emergence of transgender studies, whose emphasis on gender has had the effect of emphasizing the braided character of gender and sexuality. For a very useful discussion of "Thinking Sex," see Rubin's "Sexual Traffic" (1994).

This shift affected my own scholarship, particularly as I worked on a biography of the singer Janis Joplin. Fairly early on, I realized that while Joplin's sexuality was complicated, it wasn't because her relationships with women were sexually unrealized or ambiguous. Joplin determinedly transgressed boundaries and just as determinedly rejected identities. In this respect you might say she was prescient—the embodiment of queerness. And yet her refusal of identity was partly rooted in shame about her same-sex longings and relationships, one too unshakable to be reconciled with our own queer project, even one attentive to enduring feelings of shame.<sup>16</sup> *Scars of Sweet Paradise*, my biography, tried to give readers a piece not only of Joplin's complicated heart but also of the textures of queer America at mid-century, particularly on its demimonde fringes (Echols 1999).

It wasn't just in queer studies that gay men and lesbians began to come together. The feeling of inhabiting a common outlaw identity, which was undoubtedly heightened both by the accelerating right-wing surge and the arrival of AIDS, underwrote cross-gender queer activism, best illustrated in some parts of the country by the activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). It is not obvious to me that this would have happened were it not for feminist sex radicals who pushed for a reappraisal of gay male sexual practices that fell outside what Barnard participant Rubin (1984, 281) called the "charmed circle" of sexual acts and expressions. Five years after Barnard, ACT UP was formed, and that, in turn, led to greater intermingling between lesbians and gay men. "These guys would take their shirts off at the first possible moment of a demonstration," recalled one lesbian activist, "and they would have like a million nipple rings and they were making out whenever they could possibly incorporate that into anything. And there was a way that that was very freeing" (Gould 2009, 258).

Politically unencumbered sexuality of the sort enjoyed by many gay men was intoxicating for lesbians weary of second-guessing their every sexual move and fantasy. However, I don't want to give the impression that sexual experimentation among lesbians was primarily the result of greater contact with gay men. It was on the rise before ACT UP, fed by the arrival, post-Barnard, of lesbian sex magazines such as *Bad Attitude* and *On Our Backs*, a spiky jab at the longtime radical feminist newspaper *off our backs*. In their pages, pleasure and danger were reimagined in ways that were only hinted at during the Barnard Conference. To my recollection, the borders

<sup>16</sup> Here I am referencing the effort by some scholars to move past easy declarations of "gay pride" and examine those "disreputable" parts of post-Stonewall gay identity, including lingering feelings of shame. See Halperin and Traub (2009).

between pleasure and danger grew fuzzy then, as pleasure began to carry the intoxicating whiff of danger.

These were heady times for feminist sex radicals. Within the academy, gender studies classes were as likely to feature Vance and Rubin as Dworkin and MacKinnon. Feminist-inspired notions of sexual transgression began to penetrate the mainstream. If you need evidence, there's Madonna's 1992 video, "Erotica," whose supporting cast included members who were genderqueer and quite likely readers of *On Our Backs*. However, feminist sex radicalism had a negligible effect on policy making, and over time some of the ideas undergirding antipornography feminism made their way into offices of the United Nations and into the antitrafficking movement (Miller 2004; Vance 2011). If there is a criticism to be made of these heady times, it is that the disputatiousness of the sex wars, and, in particular critics' attacks on feminist sex radicals as "unfeminist," altered pleasure and danger on the ground. Danger, whose core elements Vance had identified as "violence, brutality . . . coercion . . . and exploitation" (1984, 327), increasingly came to mean the danger that antipornography feminism and the American Right (sometimes working in tandem) posed to sexual expressiveness. And yet this definitional shift has had an upside, as it encouraged greater skepticism toward state-sponsored efforts to regulate sexuality and intimate life.<sup>17</sup> Some of the most compelling recent feminist scholarship concerns the intertwining of neoliberalism with sex and gender politics, with the result that feminist movements that once rallied around economic fairness and liberation have shifted toward carceral solutions (see Bernstein 2004, 2012; Bumiller 2008). In some of this work, the debt to pleasure and danger is substantial.

However, this is not a story comprised entirely of silver linings. Feminist sex radicalism successfully challenged the movement's "stale dogma" about S/M, butch-femme, and transgender (Vance 1984, 22). It pushed for definitional elasticity, for a version of being a woman (and a lesbian) that was expansive enough to include all measure of transgression, includ-

<sup>17</sup> How feminism should position itself in relation to the state has divided activists since the late 1960s, whether it was rape laws or childcare. For activists wary of state-based reforms, one concern was the racially discriminatory way in which tougher rape laws might be enforced. The 1975 publication of journalist and antipornography activist Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* did little to allay those fears. In its pages, Brownmiller repudiated what she saw as the American Left's knee-jerk defense of black men accused of raping white women, whose accusations it treated with extreme skepticism. Most controversial was the way in which Brownmiller characterized teenaged African American Emmett Till, who was brutally lynched for whistling at a white female shopkeeper, as having tried in that encounter to "exercise male privilege," as Estelle Freedman (2013, 280) puts it.



ing what is increasingly termed masculine of center. It meant refashioning feminism into a space without sexual hierarchies, a space where one's political enlightenment or benightedness was unrelated to one's sexuality and gender. But in the end, that didn't quite happen. Feminism, for starters, once again fell out of fashion. Today, younger scholars, even within the tiny orbit of gender studies, sometimes know little about feminist sex radicalism.

Today, there is arguably more danger—both concrete and imagined—than at the height of the sex wars. No doubt these are dangerous times for women in many, many places across the globe. Meanwhile, closer to home, those of us who teach college are witnessing a sea change on our campuses as students mobilize for greater protection from all manner of danger, sometimes including our own dangerous ideas. Feminists are not the only students insisting on a less discomfiting curriculum, one that comes with trigger warnings and safe rooms, but they have sometimes played an outsized role in such efforts.<sup>18</sup> Yet if some younger women are feeling imperiled, others are searching for unabashed sexual fulfillment, demanding more pleasure, as evidenced most obviously by SlutWalks and a still-thriving hookup culture.

Yet as feminists are once again facing off, whether in debates over trafficking or the ever-widening deployment of Title IX on college campuses, we could profitably revisit pleasure and danger. Vance's touchstone formulation offers no magic bullets, no simple way forward. Rather, alive to the dialectical character of women's sexuality, attentive to what separates and unites women, and committed to the proposition that gender trouble is a collective condition, it is a couplet written on each and every one of our bodies.

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<sup>18</sup> As evidenced by the recent and harrowing experience of feminist scholar Laura Kipnis (2015a, 2015b), charges of sexual harassment are increasingly centering on speech. See also Kingkade (2015). For an earlier treatment of the ever-widening net of sexual harassment, see Kaminer (2011).

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