

Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation

An Interview with Audre Lorde

By Susan Leigh Star

(As published in *A Burst of Light: Essays by Audre Lorde*, 1988, Firebrand Books)

Without a rigorous and consistent evaluation of what kind of a future we wish to create, and a scrupulous examination of the expressions of power we choose to incorporate into all our relationships including our most private ones, we are not progressing, but merely recasting our own characters in the same old weary drama...S/M is not the sharing of power, it is merely a depressing replay of the old and destructive dominant/subordinate mode of human relating and one-sided power, which is even now grinding our earth and our human consciousness into dust.

Audre Lorde(1)

I spent June and July of 1980 in rural Vermont, an idyllic, green, vital world, alive in a short summer season. I teach there summers and winters. One afternoon, Sue (another teacher) and I lay sunbathing on a dock in the middle of a small pond. I suddenly imagined what it would be like to see someone dressed in black leather and chains, trotting through the meadow, as I am accustomed to seeing in my urban neighborhood in San Francisco I started laughing as one of the parameters of the theater of sadomasochism became clear; it is about cities and a created culture, like punk rock, which is sustained by a particularly urban technology.

Later in the week, Sue and I drove over bumpy dirt roads far into the Northeast Kingdom, the most rural area of Vermont, to interview Audre Lorde. Again, I was struck by the incongruity of sitting in the radiant sunshine, with radiant Audre and Frances and Sue, listening to bobwhites and watching the haze lift far down in the valley, and the subject of our conversation seemed to belong to another world.

I include this description of our physical surroundings because it seems important to me to recognize that all conversations about sadomasochism take place in particular places and at particular historical times, which ought to be noted and compared.

Leigh: How do you see the phenomenon of sadomasochism in the lesbian community?

Audre: Sadomasochism in the lesbian-feminist community cannot be seen as separate from the larger economic and social issues surrounding our communities. It is reflective of a whole social and economic trend of this country.

Sadly, sadomasochism feels comfortable to some people in this period of development. What is the nature of this allure? Why an emphasis on sadomasochism in the straight media? Sadomasochism is congruent with other developments going on in this country that have to do with dominance and submission, with disparate power—politically, culturally, and economically.

The attention that Samois (the San Francisco-based lesbian s/m organization) is getting is probably out of proportion to the representation of sadomasochism in the lesbian community. Because s/m is a theme in the dominant culture, an attempt to “reclaim” it rather than question it is an excuse not to look at the content of the behavior. For instance, “We are lesbians doing

this extreme thing and you're criticizing us!" Thus, sadomasochism is used to delegitimize lesbian-feminism, lesbianism, and feminism.

Leigh: So you're saying that the straight media both helps amplify the phenomenon within the lesbian community and that they focus on lesbians in particular as a way of not dealing with the larger implications and the very existence of the phenomenon in the world?

Audre: Yes. And because this power perspective is so much a part of the larger world, it is difficult to critique in isolation. As Erich Fromm once said, "The fact that millions of people take part in a delusion doesn't make it sane."

Leigh: What about the doctrine of "live and let live" and civil liberties issues?

Audre: I don't see that as the point. I'm not questioning anyone's right to live. I'm saying we must observe the implications of our lives. If what we are talking about is feminism, then the personal is political and we can subject everything in our lives to scrutiny. We have been nurtured in a sick, abnormal society, and we should be about the process of reclaiming ourselves as well as the terms of that society. This is complex. I speak not about condemnation but about recognizing what is happening and questioning what it means. I'm not willing to regiment anyone's life, but if we are to scrutinize our human relationships, we must be willing to scrutinize all aspects of those relationships. The subject of revolution is ourselves, is our lives.

Sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And, it prepares us either to accept subordination or to enforce dominance. Even in play, to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically.

Sadomasochism feeds the belief that domination is inevitable and legitimately enjoyable. It can be compared to the phenomenon of worshipping a godhead with two faces, and worshipping only the white part on the full moon and the black part on the dark of the moon, as if totally separate. But you cannot corral any aspect within your life, divorce its implications, whether it's what you eat for breakfast or how you say good-bye. This is what integrity means.

Leigh: That relates to two central arguments put forth by the women of Samoia: that liberal tolerance is necessary in the realm of sexuality and that the power over part of the relationship is confined to the bedroom. I feel, as you do, that it is dangerous to try to cordon off such a vital part of our lives in this way.

Audre: If it is confined to the bedroom, then why was the Samoia booklet (*What Color is Your Handkerchief?: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader*) printed? If it is not, then what does that mean? It is in the interest of a capitalist profit system for us to privatize much of our experience. In order to make integrated life choices, we must open the sluice gates in our lives, create emotional consistency. This is not to say that we act the same way, or do not change and grow, but that there is an underlying integrity that asserts itself in all of our actions. None of us is perfect, or born with that integrity, but we can work toward it as a goal.

The erotic weaves through our lives, and integrity is a basic condition that we aspire to. If we do not have the lessons of our journeys toward that condition, then we have nothing. From that life-vision, one is free to examine varying paths of behavior. But integrity has to be a basis for the journey.

Certain things in every society are defined as totally destructive. For instance, the old example of crying “fire” in a crowded theater. Liberalism allows pornography and has allowed wife-beating as First Amendment rights. But this doesn’t fit them into my life-vision, and they are both an immediate threat to my life.

The question I ask, over and over, is who is profiting from this? When sadomasochism gets presented on center stage as a conflict in the feminist movement, I ask, what conflicts are not being presented?

Leigh: How do you think sadomasochism starts? What are its roots?

Audre: In the superior/inferior mold which is inculcated within us at the deepest levels. The learned intolerance of differences.

Those involved with sadomasochism are acting out the intolerance of differences which we all learn: superiority and thereby the right to dominate. The conflict is supposedly self-limiting because it happens behind bedroom doors. Can this be so, when the erotic empowers, nourishes, and permeates all of our lives?

I ask myself, under close scrutiny, whether I am puritanical about this—and I have asked myself this very carefully—and the answer is no. I feel that we work toward making integrated life-decisions about the networks of our lives, and those decisions lead us to other decisions and commitments—certain ways of viewing the world, looking for change. If they don’t lead us toward growth and change, we have nothing to build upon, no future.

Leigh: Do you think sadomasochism is different for gay men than for lesbians?

Audre: Who profits from lesbians beating each other? White men have been raised to believe that they’re God; most gay white men are marginal in only one respect. Much of the gay white movement seeks to be included in the American dream and is angered when they do not receive the standard white male privileges, misnamed as “American democracy.”

Often, white gay men are working not to change the system. This is one of the reasons why the gay male movement is as white as it is. Black gay men recognize, again by the facts of survival, that being Black, they are not going to be included in the same way. The Black/white gay male division is being examined and explored by some. Recently, for instance, there was a meeting of Third World lesbians and gays in Washington. It was recognized that there are things we do not share with white lesbians and gay men, as well as things that we do, and that clarification of goals is necessary between white gays and lesbians, and Third World gays and lesbians.

I see no essential battle between many gay men and the white male establishment. To be sure, there are gay men who do not view their oppressions as isolated, and who work for a future. But it is a matter of majority politics; many gay white males are being pulled by the same

strings as other white men in this society. You do not get people to work against what they have identified as their basic self-interest.

Leigh: So one of the things that you're saying is that the politics of s/m are connected with the politics of the larger movements?

Audre: I do not believe that sexuality is separate from living. As a minority woman, I know dominance and subordination are not bedroom issues. In the same way that rape is not about sex, s/m is not about sex but about how we use power. If it were only about personal sexual exchange or private taste, why would it be presented as a political issue?

Leigh: I often feel that there's a kind of tyranny about the whole concept of feelings, as though, if you feel something then you must act on it.

Audre: You don't feel a tank or a war—you feel hate or love. Feelings are not wrong, but you are accountable for the behavior you use to satisfy those feelings.

Leigh: What about how Samois and other lesbian sadomasochists use the concept of power?

Audre: The s/m concept of "vanilla" sex is sex devoid of passion. They are saying that there can be no passion without unequal power. That feels very sad and lonely to me, and destructive. The linkage of passion to dominance/subordination is the prototype of the heterosexual image of male-female relationships, one which justifies pornography. Women are supposed to love being brutalized. This is also the prototypical justification of all relationships of oppression—that the subordinate one who is "different" enjoys the inferior position.

The gay male movement, for example, is invested in distinguishing between gay s/m pornography and heterosexual pornography. Gay men can allow themselves the luxury of not seeing the consequences. We, as women and as feminists, must scrutinize our actions and see what they imply, and upon what they are based.

As women, we have been trained to follow. We must look at the s/m phenomenon and educate ourselves, at the same time being aware of intricate manipulations from outside and within.

Leigh: How does this relate specifically to lesbian-feminism?

Audre: First, we must ask ourselves, is this whole question of s/m sex in the lesbian community perhaps being used to draw attention and energies away from other more pressing and immediate life-threatening issues facing us as women in this racist, conservative, and repressive period? A red herring? A smoke screen for provocateurs? Second, lesbian s/m is not about what you do in bed, just as lesbianism is not simply a sexual preference. For example, Barbara Smith's work on women-identified women, on "lesbian" experiences in Zora Hurston or Toni Morrison.(2) It is not who I sleep with that defines the quality of these acts, not what we do together, but what life-statements I am led to make as the nature and effect of my erotic relationships percolate throughout my life and my being. As a deep lode of our erotic lives and knowledge, how does our sexuality enrich us and empower our actions?

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, "Letter to the Editor," *Gay Community News* 7:37 (April 12, 1980), p. 4.

2. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions Two* (October 1977), pp. 25-44.