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Letters

Congratulations on a fine new magazine! I wish I could restrict myself to praise and encouragement—but unfortunately I was disturbed by your choice of Alex Wilson's article ('*The Anti-Porn Roadshow: Feminism as Law and Order*') as the main article on sexual politics for the first issue. My reservations are as follows:

1) I was puzzled as to why Alex took up so much space to comment on the pornography symposium held in Toronto in early February 1984. Varda Burstyn's detailed, excellent piece in *Fuse* (Summer 1984) had covered much of the same ground, also from an anti-censorship perspective. The failure to acknowledge that others, and especially feminist others, had already done thorough critiques of both the symposium and the anti-porn movement in general strikes the feminist reader as insulting. Alex thus presents himself as the omniscient male above the heads of emotionally overwrought feminists. A bad start.

2) Alex would have us believe that Toronto feminists hailed the symposium as our deliverance, writing that 'these interventions were hailed as victories in the Toronto feminist press'. And then he quotes from an article by Susan Cole in *Broadside*. Now, it's well known to most of us that Susan's views are merely one opinion among many (and incidentally, she wasn't even asked to speak at the symposium). Alex's reductionism fits right in with the bourgeois press' construction of a mythical Feminist Bogeywoman, speaking with a single voice to ask for state protection. That is a stereotype, and one which we unfortunately see in *The Body Politic* every month—I was hoping for something a little more accurate from *borderlines*.

3) Having dismissed anti-porn feminists as dupes of the state, Alex goes on to dismiss 'cultural feminism in general'. What the hell does he mean by 'cultural feminism'? He only says, enigmatically, that said cultural feminists do 'nothing to challenge the power of the state'. Well, I'm confused. The state sure does a lot to challenge cultural feminists—cf the censoring of both *Born in Flames* and *Not a Love Story*. I would suggest that we feminists be left to make our own pronouncements on feminism, cultural or otherwise.

4) Violence against women and children is completely trivialized. Alex ridicules attempts to stop male violence by rhetorically asking what the targets of an anti-violence campaign might be—'Men? Terrorism? The police? Competitive sports? Hurricanes?' That's not very funny, Alex. Just because the reactionary US Surgeon General claims to deplore violence against women and children, it does not mean that all attempts to curtail male violence are misguided. And no, violence is not like a hurricane, and no, we don't need men to point this out, thank you. Alex says something about violence being a part of life in primitive societies; are we to understand that we should therefore accept it? Is queerbashing a fact of nature? Women have very good reasons to be concerned about violence, and the manipulation of this concern by the right wing should lead the left to try to come up with *real* answers, real strategies to combat male violence. For male leftists, gay or straight, to write cute little sen-

tences ridiculing women's experience of violence is surely both insulting and politically misguided.

5) Every time that the word 'feminist' is used in the article, beginning with the title, it is in a negative context. By contrast, when Alex wants to refer to that small part of feminism that he happens to agree with, he subsumes it under the larger label of 'sexual liberation movements'. This is manipulating language to disempower the oppressed. Feminism is much larger than sexual liberation: it includes a call for the radical reorganization of the economy and the family, as well as the subversion of sex and gender roles. Men cannot take a few crumbs of the feminist critique of gender, assimilate that into a male-defined sexual liberationism, and throw out the rest of feminism into the garbage. That sort of thing is not just the manipulation of feminist discourse: it also expresses a fundamental contempt for the integrity of women's experience. This contempt comes across in the supercilious tone used by Alex throughout—he does not see that there's something a bit warped in treating all feminists in the same way as we treat the ideologues of the FBI or the morality squad. I can only hope that this sleight-of-hand, which begins as a reasonable critique of some aspects of the women's movement but turns into a complete dismissal and distortion of feminism *per se*, is not an ongoing aspect of the politics of *borderlines*.

Mariana Valverde
Toronto

Alexander Wilson responds:

I'll try to be brief. In the first place, I didn't mean my article to be an attack on feminism. My title—'*The Anti-Porn Roadshow: Feminism as Law and Order*'—was meant as a critique of a widespread (and hegemonic) social movement within feminism that, to put it crudely, sees pornography as a primary cause of sexism, and even rape. I think that analysis is mistaken, and naive, and dangerous in its political ramifications. I also think, as many women do, that it has nothing to do with feminism. But here's the problem: many people in the anti-porn movement call themselves feminist. All of us are going to have to figure out how to deal with what's obviously a changed political moment and a fragmented social movement. Feminism is in crisis both because of challenges from within and because it has had to accommodate itself to a social agenda increasingly defined by the right. Now, we can either respond with our own dogma, or insist on opening up in a theoretical and tentative way the debate about sex, representation, desire and pleasure. Let's face it, we also need a new strategy, for by this time I'm sure it's as obvious to Mariana as to anyone that the few advances women and gay people have made in the past decade are being avenged today by the conservatives who hold power.

But you see, this debate has already been going on within the women's movement itself, and I'm a little amazed at Mariana's dishonesty about that. I'm sure we read many of the same rags and journals, but nowhere in her letter does Mariana take seriously the much good work—and bitter struggles—by women who are critical of the anti-porn



movement (her mention of Varda Burstyn notwithstanding). I'm thinking of the writing of Ellen Willis, Pat Califia, Amber Hollibaugh, Alice Echols, Lisa Steele, Chris Bearchell, Deirdre English, Thelma McCormack, Sue Golding, Gayle Rubin, Carole Vance and many others. The formidable challenge of the lesbian S/M movement has been silenced, as has the pioneering work presented at the Barnard Conference several years ago, now published in the book *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. This is the kind of work I mean when I talk about sexual liberation movements, a term I'm afraid I don't use perjoratively. For one thing, it puts pleasure on the agenda, something regrettably lacking from anti-porn (and much leftist) politics today.

I want to object, too, to Mariana's uncritical reproduction of dominant cultural assumptions about gender. Her letter is littered with references to 'male omniscience', 'the male left', 'male violence', etc. Mariana does in her work precisely what she accuses me of doing vis-à-vis feminism: conflate under one heading everything 'male'. What kind of assumptions underlie this language? What's it supposed to mean? What are the other terms here: 'female non-violence'? 'female ignorance'? What became of the early feminist insistence on abolishing gender as a meaningful category? How has it come to be so easy, within hegemonic feminist discourse today, to make an essential and inevitable connection between a biological state and a complicated set of behaviours? Where is there any recognition on Mariana's part of the considerable opposition within feminism to this position?

I'm sorry that Mariana doesn't treat seriously what for me were the key theoretical issues when I sat down to write this piece a year ago: Why does the anti-porn movement privilege sexual representations over all others? What is consent? What are the causes of sexual violence? More generally, what's the nature—actual and ideological—of violence in this society, and what kind of language do we use to talk about it? What is the status of sexual fantasy? Why aren't we talking about the availability of sex education (and the possibility of sex) for kids?

Women have much to fear in this society, and that danger coalesces around sexuality. Yet the anti-porn movement makes no distinction between sex or violence or domination and their representations. Images get addressed as if they were the equivalent of social relations. This is a problem, it seems to me, and as I suggested in my article I think it has something to do with the peculiarly privileged status of photography in this culture, and the extent to which the image (and the commodity) has penetrated our social relations—and our bodies. I don't see any agreement about the ambiguous relationships between these images and practices. I do see a lot of people getting onto an escalator—legitimated by the truth claims of science—that begins with something like 'images influence attitudes' and ends up with 'images instruct people to commit criminal acts'. (And smoking pot leads to heroin.) There's a lot of work to be done here that would clearly want to say something about advertising, TV and other popular cultural forms, as well as the public relations/public opinion poll apparatus, the scientific establishment, ideologies of objectivity—and yes, violence and hurricanes and S/M too. There is also the very basic work of developing a political economy of the sex industry.

I'm sorry, but I can't accept the data we have as truth. I still have a lot of questions. The anti-porn movement, however, doesn't seem to. They talk in absolutes: about gender, representation, the nature of feminism, and so on. They also seem to know good porn from bad, where I can't tell the difference. I realize that if I don't think in absolutes about these things I run the risk of sounding liberal or anti-feminist. But if we can't be critical of feminism—or socialism for that matter—then I give up.

Unlike Mariana, I don't think these things are settled. I know all kinds of feminists who are trying desperately to air in a speculative way some of the issues I've schematically mentioned here. As for *borderlines*, I hope we can make some contribution to moving the debate forward—or at least out of the rut we're in at present—and to building a sexual oppositional community. To this project, we welcome contributions of any sort.



A listing of academic, political and cultural events, compiled by Kieran Bonner and Peter Fitting.

This section aims to bring together the various events, particularly in Canada, which are not generally publicized.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL EVENTS

For political and cultural events we want to provide a publicizing opportunity for those events which, for financial or ideological reasons, do not have access to the major media outlets.

● **AFTER THE TRIUMPH: MICHAEL MITCHELL**—Feb 22-Mar 17, Community Gallery, Harbourfront, Toronto. Commissioned by the NFB, this work chronicles life before and after the Revolution and speaks eloquently of life in Nicaragua. Info: Victor Coleman, 74 Hillsdale Ave E, Toronto, ON M4S 1T5.

● **FLIGHTS OF FANCY: NEWFOUNDLAND YARD ART**—March 1-April 14 at the London Regional Art Gallery.

● **THE ARTISTS' NETWORK OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**—meets every month in Toronto: the first Monday of the month at 7 pm at 10 Trinity Square, behind the Eaton's Centre.

● **PHOTOJOURNALISM IN NICARAGUA**—Feb 22-Mar 31, Loft Gallery, Harbourfront, Toronto. This show, coordinated by Artnica, features photographs focussing on the November elections. It shows how the elections were conducted under war conditions and how the election was portrayed by the Nicaraguan media. Info: Judy Whalen, 74 Hillsdale Ave E, Toronto, ON M4S 1T5, (416)486-0898.

● **CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**—Mar 14-16, University of Waterloo. Community-based economies, appropriate technology and the future. Keynote address by Murray Bookchin. Info: Waterloo Public Interest Research Group, (519)884-9020.

● **NEW MUSIC AMERICA 1986**—The Eighth Annual Festival of New Music, Apr 5-13, Houston, Texas. Info: New Music America, 1964 West Gray St, Ste 227, Houston, TX 77019, USA.

● **SPOKESPEOPLE**—A conference on bicycle advocacy, Apr 26-27, Toronto City Hall Council Chambers. Info: Kate Sutherland at Energy Probe (416)978-7014.

A series of recent developments in Toronto makes me nervous about the continued possibility of an oppositional culture: the renovation of Queen Street, the pressure to extend expressways, intensified land speculation, the megadome itself. This is happening in cities everywhere. What kinds of urban culture are threatened by this capital expansion, and what sort of politics can we make to undo it?

Here's a conference that begins to think about how to effect social change today. The objective is to bring together a range of social movements now working in isolation around one goal: the transformation of urban space and social organization away from the private automobile. Participants will be drawn from community health groups, anti-expressway coalitions, community gardeners, provincial cycling groups, architects and landscapers, municipal cycling committees, environmental organizations, planners, etc.

The Friday evening session will open with a talk by urban theorist Jane Jacobs that will suggest ways forward for grass-roots urban politics. Saturday morning sessions will identify common goals and strategies. Afternoon workshops will focus on the integration of specific tasks such as media work, fundraising, lobbying, educational programs, direct action, community projects, etc.

Bicycle advocacy has traditionally been based on a kind of voluntarism that never sees the big picture. By this time, surely we can draw on a rich and variegated history of urban social movements, as well as the specifically ecological politics underway in much of the rest of North America. Bicycle advocacy is a good example of a politics that is both local and decentralized, and broad in its cultural implications. It's also something achievable.

Alexander Wilson
● **INTERNATIONAL PEACE COLLOQUIUM**—May 8-10, Moncton. L'Université de Moncton organise un colloque international sur la paix. Les participants étudieront notamment: les moyens à prendre pour servir la paix dans le monde, les politiques des Etats et des institutions internationales, les relations entre les superpuissances, la contribution de la politique extérieure du Canada à la défense de la paix, le rôle des établissements éducatifs et culturels, particulièrement celui des universités, le rôle et

l'influence des media. Pour obtenir de plus amples renseignements, on voudra bien s'adresser à M. Khaled Belkhdouja, professeur titulaire, Faculté des arts, Université de Moncton (Nouveau-Brunswick) E1A 3E9.

● **THE FIRST TEN YEARS: 1975-1985**—May. A ten-year retrospective of the work of the Off Centre Centre gallery of Calgary.

● **THEATRE FESTIVAL OF THE AMERICAS**—May 22-June 4, Montreal. Two weeks of theatre from around the world, to be run simultaneously with the 16th FESTIVAL QUEBECOIS DU JEUNE THEATRE. Info: Theatre Festival, Box 119, Stn N, Montreal, PQ H2X 3M2.

● **AMERICAN FILM FESTIVAL**—May 27-June 1, Roosevelt Hotel, New York City. 27th annual showcase of documentary and short films. Categories include: Art and Culture; Contemporary Concerns; Education and Information; Feature-length Documentary; Film as Art; Mental Health and Guidance; etc. Info: Educational Film Library Association, 45 John St, New York, NY 10038, USA.

● **CIVIL RIGHTS EXHIBITION**—May-Aug, Saskatoon. An exhibition dealing with the development of civil rights in Saskatchewan at the Diefenbaker Centre. There will be a special focus on the rights of native people, particularly of native women.

● **POPULAR MUSIC TODAY**—June 24-29, Montreal. The International Association for the Study of Popular Music is an interdisciplinary association working since 1981 for the development and the promotion of studies on popular music. The Third International Conference will gather researchers from different countries, producers, journalists, DJs and musicians under the theme 'Popular Music Today'. On the program: Jazz, Video, Semiotics, Technology, Music and National Cultures, Current Issues in the Politics of Popular Music, Mainstream Pop, Canadian Music Now. Papers, workshops, video sessions, musicians panels and shows are scheduled. The official languages of the conference are French and English; simultaneous interpretation in French and English will be available. Info: Dr. John Shepherd, Department of Music, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6.

● **CREATING CHOICES THROUGH FEMINIST EDUCATION CONFERENCE**—June 19-23, Seattle, Washington. The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) is holding its 7th annual convention at the University of Washington. The conference coincides with the fifteenth anniversary of the University of Washington Women Studies Program. The convention will include interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and practical sessions on all phases of feminist education and research. The emphasis at the convention will be on the choices created through feminist education in both the classroom and community. Session categories include: Feminist Education; The Arts from a Feminist Perspective; Feminist Research in the Humanities/Social Sciences, and/or Natural Sciences; and Feminist Practice and Theory. The conference will also include a Plenary Session and workshops on and about poor and working-class women. Info: Sydney Daplan, Director of Women's Studies, Program GN-45, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.

● **SEX AND THE STATE: THEIR LAWS, OUR LIVES**—July 3-6, Toronto. An International Conference on Lesbian and Gay History. From July 1 to July 7, the annual International Gay Association (IGA) conference will be taking place in Toronto, with delegates and observers from around the world. In association with this event an international lesbian and gay history conference is being organized to be held at the University of Toronto. The proposed theme of this conference is 'Sex and the state: their laws, our lives' and it hopes to be able to bring lesbian and gay historians together from around the world for this important event. The topic 'Sex and the state' is seen as encompassing the various ways in which the law, state policy and morality have restricted and controlled lesbian and gay behaviour as well as the ways in which lesbians and gay men have resisted these restrictions and controls in their daily lives. The conference is intended to be an important forum for new research and historical discoveries, as well as for the sharing of information and research. There will be an opportunity for historians from Europe, Australia and New Zealand to participate. Papers and ideas for panels, discussions, slide-shows, films and other presentations at the conference will be solicited. The basic format of the conference will be papers and presentations of approximately 45 minutes in