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M-powerment

Karmen MacKendrick

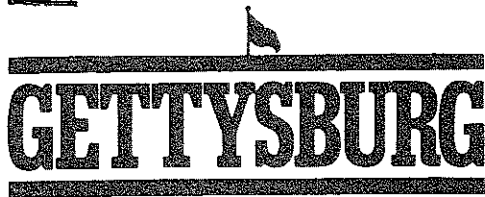
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Following is a proposal for the 1997 symposium of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues, "Perspectives on Progress." I hope I've formatted it properly; please let me know if you have questions or if something is unclear in it. Thank you!

Karmen MacKendrick
Karmen MacKendrick

format

title: m-powerment

This presentation is in the form of a talk--more directly engaged, but along the same lines as, a traditional academic paper. I would expect it to be of ordinary conference length--20-30 minutes--though I admit that I would leap at the chance to speak for perhaps 15 minutes longer, should you have a forum (such as a 2-person panel session, perhaps?) for such a thing. The discussion is based upon a manuscript (entitled *Counterpleasures*) that I'm currently reworking for the postmodern culture series at SUNY Press, and it would fit into your call for work on the politics of S/M.

summary

The s/m-negative line of argument in feminism, based upon the assumption that s/m reappropriates oppressive and anti-woman forms of power (and is thus an *especially* undesirable practice for lesbians), has been met largely by a liberal or libertarian response--that what one does consensually is no-one else's business. To this the counter-response has been that a liberal response is inadequate to a radical critique. From an s/m-affirming approach, I nonetheless think that this last criticism is accurate, and that the attempt to place s/m as "power with" rather than "power over" is inadequate. I therefore begin with a more-radical response, specifically a re-thinking of the forms of power involved in s/m, which I believe is a resistant, transgressive mode of the embodiment of pleasure.

Power is not merely control. Working from the perspective of masochism (because the issues are quite complicated, the talk would be restricted to masochistic pleasure and power, though I would be happy to address sadism in discussion), I argue that masochistic practice is both empowering and subversive: it subverts disciplinary power by its refusal of teleology^{looking for pleasure in itself} (which usually plays out as productivity but which shows up as well in the "politically correct" emphasis on gratification), and it subverts *subjection* precisely by transgressing the limits of the *subject*, making possible an extraordinary freedom and power in the body--though not "over" something else. Indeed, if there is a "goal" to masochism, it is precisely one which cannot be approached as a goal: the loss of subjectivity. The intensification of sensation and of restraint work as strategies to subvert ego-boundaries; "bottom-space" is a sense of being taken outside of the limits of oneself.

I explore the ways in which pain and restraint, deliberately sought, make this possible (and how this contextual infliction differs from nonconsensual violence). To make this (largely Foucauldean) argument, I draw on s/m-positive feminist work (largely from Laura Antoniou, Pat Califia and the publications of the Samois collective) as well as on the more abstractly theoretical work of Foucault and Bataille; and respond to the s/m-negative arguments of the early collection *Against Sado-masochism* as well as later arguments by Saxe, Bartky, and others. I believe that this more radical reconception of power is a stronger response to these arguments than the liberal arguments have been, and is vital to a radical political understanding of the subversive, rather than oppressive, potential of s/m.

- This is a topic that is controversial + is from a perspective that is done after we've heard about (pro sim).
- I think it's relevant + ~~is~~ accepting

This goes with Kubala's proposal
+ I say yes (gw)
→ (mc)