"Andrea Dworkin was probably turning in her grave": Pornography, (Post)Feminist Backlash and Contemporary Women's Memoirs

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Summary

In a comment that is perhaps representative of new voices in contemporary feminist criticism, Natasha Walter states that in the 1970s "[a]ll treatments of sexuality in culture were forced to reveal the imprint of sexism". She concludes that a minority of feminists perceived "any hint of sexuality in culture" as "proof of sexism" (Walter 1999: 112). Now, in the 21st century, the representation of dominant female sexuality, across all mediums of visual and textual expression, predominantly avoids the usual cultural trap of promiscuity; the image of the uncontrolled nymphomaniac, and it is this climate of active female sexual expression and a more inclusive (post)feminist discourse that has seen recent erotic non-fiction memoirs thrive. In this article, I will discuss three recent erotic memoirs: Melissa P.'s *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush before Bed* (2004), Toni Bentley's *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* (2006) and Catherine Townsend's *Breaking the Rules: Confessions of a Bad Girl* (2008). In the context of these memoirs, I will discuss the manner in which the texts celebrate, rather than contest, the eroticisation of male power and sexual values ascribed by the mainstreaming of the sex industry, and demonstrate how, in the context of postfeminist rhetoric and second-wave feminist backlash, this eroticisation of male power is represented, contentiously and divisively, as ostensibly liberating to women.

Opsomming

In 'n opmerking wat dalk nuwe stemme in kontemporêre feministiese kritiek verteenwoordig, sê Natasha Walter "*[a]ll treatments of sexuality in culture were forced to reveal the imprint of sexism*" in die 1970s. Sy kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat min feministe "*any hint of sexuality in culture*" as "*proof of sexism*" beskou het (Walter 1999: 112). Nou, in die 21ste eeu, word die gewone kulturele vangstrik van promiskuïteit – die beeld van die onbeheersde nimfomaan – in die uitbeelding van dominante vroulike seksualiteit oor alle visuele en tekstuele mediums heen hoofsaaklik vermy, en is dit juis hierdie klimaat van aktiewe vroulike seksuele uitdrukking en 'n meer inklusiewe (post)feministiese diskoers wat gelei het tot die onlangse opbloeiing van erotiese niefiksie memoires. In hierdie artikel bespreek ek drie onlangse erotiese memoires: Melissa P. se *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush before Bed* (2004), Toni Bentley se *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* (2006) en Catherine Townsend se *Breaking the Rules: Confessions of a Bad Girl* (2008). In die

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konteks van hierdie memoires kyk ek na die manier waarop hierdie tekste die erotisering van manlike mag en seksuele waardes (wat die nuwe hoofstroomstatus van die seksbedryf daaraan toeskryf) besing, eerder as bevraagteken, en toon ek hoe hierdie erotisering van manlike mag – in die konteks van postfeministiese retoriek en die tweedegolf-feministiese reaksie – kontensieus en verdelend uitgebeeld word as oënskynlik bevrydend vir vroue.

It is perhaps impossible to discuss contemporary women's erotic memoirs without discussing the nature of feminist constructions of intimacy in the twenty-first century. The form of the memoir is necessarily private, and contemporary erotic memoirs function in counterpoint to public narratives of sexuality which largely focus on behaviour and attitudes confined to the realms of gendered social acceptability. The form is, therefore, highly intimate, with narrative voices often claiming to relay experiences that are entirely genuine. We only have to recall the controversy surrounding James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) to remind ourselves that memoirs are often either consciously fictionalised or unconsciously unreliable, but even so, it is the very nature of perceived authenticity on the part of the reader that establishes the memoir as a subjectively, yet undeniably, intimate form. The intimacy of the form is further enhanced by discussions of sexual exchange, consistent with the status of sex as the most taboo form of intimacy, and one that is often a site of not only pleasure but even uncomfortable and transgressive experiences, both physical and emotional. Robert Jensen makes the astute comment that "precisely because they are powerful experiences, intimacy and sex are never risk free", and continues to assert that "attempts to make this human interaction free of any risk would almost certainly render human interaction meaningless" (Jensen 2007: 154). Naomi Wolf makes a similar observation, charting the memoir as the location of transgressive stories, narratives which "are rarely spoken outside that private space, or after adolescence, because they include elements of sex and greed, danger and narcissism, insecurity and bad behavior" (Wolf 1997: 114). These private stories, especially stories of female promiscuity, are indeed private as they often directly subvert or subtly reconfigure mainstream public narratives of sex which, according to Lynne Jamieson, "offer a variety of contradictory messages which sustain both a strong narrative of predatory male sexuality separated from intimacy and a romantic fusion of sex and intimacy" (Jamieson 1998: 133). She continues to observe that while it is impossible to "definitively judge the balance of narratives of popular culture, films, advertising, television soaps, novels and the like ... predatory male sexuality remains a celebrated theme and a commercially successful formula" (p. 134). Narratives of female promiscuity are relegated to the private sphere largely due to limited public space for their expression, despite the fact that the twenty-first century bears witness to a diverse and increasing range of sexual economies and practices represented in the mainstream media.

In *Promiscuities: A Secret History of Female Desire* (1997), Naomi Wolf attests to the role of life writing in feminist consciousness raising, commenting that "there is something missing from our psychological understanding of how girls become women today that only first-person accounts can fill" (Wolf 1997: 3). Similarly, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards observe that in historical terms "women's personal stories have been the evidence of where the movement needs to go politically" (Baumgardner & Richards [2000]2010: 20).

Despite this, sexual politics have always been a site of contention in feminist history. In *The New Feminism* (1999), Natasha Walter condemns the occasional hysteria of second-wave feminist thought, commenting that in the 1970s, "[a]ll treatments of sexuality in culture were forced to reveal the imprint of sexism", and concludes that a minority of feminists perceived "any hint of sexuality in culture" as "proof of sexism" (Walter 1999: 112). Now, in the 21st century, both the representation of dominant female sexuality and responses to female representations of sexuality have emphatically changed, across all mediums of visual and textual expression, predominantly avoiding "the usual cultural trap of promiscuity: the image of the uncontrolled nymphomaniac" (p. 113). Just as contemporary popular culture is more receptive to female sexual expression, feminist critical discourse has become more tolerant to the liberating possibilities of heterosexual relations, with feminists such as Walter asserting that any insistence on perceiving heterosexual culture as a threat to female agency entails losing "the great power that women have often felt in that world" (p. 113). Walter continues to assert that unless the potential advantages of heterosexual relations are fully realised, feminists "run the risk of placing women as victims even when they are not" (p. 112). It is this climate of active female sexual expression and a more inclusive feminist discourse that has seen recent erotic non-fiction memoirs thrive, the evaluation of which cannot be separated from discussions of the diversity and discord of both past and present feminist responses to pornography. Even though second-wave feminist debates on the subject began more than thirty years ago with the work of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, these debates still rage, with Feona Attwood making the astute comment that contemporary online pornographies invoke debates echoing earlier configurations of pornography as "framed in two quite distinct ways", as either "a brave new frontier for sexual expression" or a "perilous vortex of danger and corruption" (Attwood 2010: 1). Debates surrounding pornography have been further complicated since the ascent of postfeminist discourse, and in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2010), Natasha Walter comments that "the classic feminist critique of pornography had left something very important out: it assumed that women never take any pleasure in pornography" (Walter 2010: 105). In this article, I will discuss two recent erotic memoirs: Toni Bentley's *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* (2006) and Catherine

Townsend's *Breaking the Rules: Confessions of a Bad Girl* (2008). In the context of these memoirs, I will discuss the manner in which the texts celebrate, rather than contest, the eroticisation of male power and sexual values ascribed by the mainstreaming of the sex industry. I will argue how, despite the ostensibly liberating postfeminist sensibilities of these memoirs, all remain trapped within male-dominated discourses that are limiting to women's empowerment.

The memoirs of Townsend and Bentley serve to resurrect contemporary debates surrounding new forms of pornography, which include not only the growth of internet pornography but also print pornography and erotica – as evident in the explosion of publications by authors Belle du Jour, Tracy Quan, Sienna Lewis, and Ellouise Moore – serve to rearticulate concerns about the negative "effects" of pornography on "beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour; especially the encouragement of violence against women, the endorsement of sexist and misogynist views, the destruction of childhood innocence, and the commodification of relationships" (Attwood 2010: 1). Jeffrey Weeks summarises the real-world implications of these concerns by commenting that feminist contestation to pornography and sadomasochistic practices "relies on the argument that representations of violence can cause violence", and that "sexual behaviour which flirts with power imbalances can sustain existing power relations" (Weeks 2003: 125), a position equally contested by a minority of feminist academics: "The excuse for banning 'violent' porn is that this will end violence against women. The causal connection is dubious. It is indisputably true that very few people who consume pornography ever assault or rape another person" (Califia 1996: 236). It is in this minefield of political discordance that we approach erotic women's writing, the discussion and evaluation of which are more pertinent in the twenty-first century than ever before, as "[m]any women who would call themselves feminists have come to accept that they are growing up in a world where pornography is ubiquitous and will be part of almost everyone's sexual experiences" (Walter 2010: 102).

In Catherine Townsend's *Breaking the Rules: Confessions of a Bad Girl*, the impact of pornography on sexual encounters and on the construction of female desire is striking. In confessing her own consumption of pornography, Townsend's non-fictional memoir can be read in a postfeminist frame of reference, especially if we define postfeminism as "indicative of a 'post-traditional' era characterised by dramatic changes in basic social relationships, role stereotyping and conceptions of agency" (Genz & Brabon 2009: 1). Townsend's reconfiguration of women's desire as similar, rather than oppositional, to the manner in which male desire has been historically constructed, is clear in her confession: "[F]orget all this stuff about women not being visual, I prefer my porn to have minimal storylines and maximum action!" (Townsend 2008: 106). Reflecting on her "sexual hard-wiring", Townsend comments on having "always felt like a freak" as, in opposition

to popular constructions of female sexuality predicated on emotional intimacy, she is "very visual when it comes to sex", leading to numerous textual accounts of the centrality of bodily objectification in her understanding of female desire: "Seeing JP step out of the shower, or even bend over to take out the washing, and catching a sideways sliver of toned stomach or the ripple in his calves and curve of his ass as he pulls out the whites sends me into a frenzy" (p. 191). Similarly, even though her narrative contains elements that ostensibly accord with second-wave feminist critiques of pornography in which "women are sexual objects and men are sexual subjects" (Jensen 2007: 64-65), the author resituates sexual objectification as entirely self-willed. Townsend is politically aware, conscious of the historical trajectory of the women's movement, commenting to her lover, "I'd really like it if you would come on my face. It's very porn star", and requests to be treated "like a dirty whore", conceding that "Andrea Dworkin was probably turning in her grave" (p. 167). Her masochistic desire to simulate pornography practices that centralise male power and female submission, and the criticism this may invoke from certain factions of contemporary feminist thought, needs to be understood in the context of dominant attitudes to sexuality more discursively. Pat Califia, a feminist and sadomasochist practitioner, makes this clear in her astute observation that, depending on the context, "certain sensations may frighten you, make you angry, urge you on, or get you hot", and that "people choose to endure pain or discomfort if the goal they are striving for makes it worthwhile". By continuing to emphasise that "long-distance runners are not generally thought of as sex perverts, nor is St Theresa", Califia comes to conclude that "the fact that masochism is disapproved of when stressful athletic activity and religious martyrdom are not is an interesting example of the way sex is made a special case in our society" (Califia 1996: 234). While it is difficult to contest Califia's rationale, her comments force the reader to consider what "goal" Townsend is attempting to achieve in her conscious simulation of pornography performance.

In the context of Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2006), perhaps Townsend is guilty of conforming to Levy's definition of a "female chauvinist pig", a woman who "makes sex objects of other women and of themselves" (Levy 2006: 4). After noticing the effect that women in porn have on her lover, "the girls onscreen were in the 69 position, which only turned him on more", Townsend responds accordingly: "I wet my hair and lathered up, starting to massage the body wash into my D-cup breasts before soaping further down by sliding my hand between my legs" (Townsend 2008: 24). Performing sexuality in modes of display contingent with pornography becomes the core of Townsend's sexual identity, conspicuous in her description of an MMF threesome: "I could feel the inside walls of my pussy tightening as Mark slammed into me while still massaging my clit, and Russell's rhythmic

movements grew more insistent. Then, as my orgasm started to build again, I felt Russell spurt into my mouth" (p. 27). Her desire to conform to pornography practices can perhaps be explained as a desire to establish herself as an empowered woman whose postfeminist agency is contingent upon "self-objectification and dependence upon the approving gaze of others" (Budgeon 1994: 66). Yet, in order to achieve this "empowerment", Townsend has to begin a process of self-deindividuation in accordance with pornography's dominant values. In analysing feature and gonzo forms of pornography, Robert Jensen identifies two "basic themes [that] are common to all mass-marketed heterosexual pornography", the first being that "all women at all times want sex from all men", and the second, "women like all the sexual acts that men perform or demand" (Jensen 2007: 62). In Jensen's appraisal of pornography, women who do not subscribe to these models of female desire "can be easily turned with a little force", emphasising the physical violence of the industry, yet he proceeds to state that "such force is rarely necessary, however, for most of the women in pornography are the nymphomaniacs men fantasize about" (p. 56). In forcing female porn stars to enact nymphomania, pornography documents "sexual activity in which women are less than fully human" (p. 61). Townsend's route to "empowerment" manifests itself through accentuating her nymphomania, and it becomes difficult for the reader to recognise her as an individual outside of sexual contexts. She amuses herself with the idea of her mother finding her "stash of lesbian anal porn" and "twenty-four-carat gold-plated glass dildos" (Townsend 2008: 30), and thus (like the reader) perceiving her daughter as a transgressive nymphomaniac, thus collapsing sexual transgression and sexual empowerment into the same space. Yet, rather than an authentic expression of female desire and selfhood, this transgression is entirely performative, evident in sexual exchanges that are disconnected from emotional intimacy. Townsend's sexual desire is expressed through a simulacrum of porn encounters, and we witness mutual masturbation sessions between her and her lover, where "seeing him explode all over himself was one of the horniest things [she] had ever seen" (p. 54). Simon Hardy identifies the "money shot" (capturing the moment of external ejaculation) as "the ultimate distinguishing marker between private sex and porn performance", as it requires the sacrifice of what many people would consider to be "the crucial moment of tactile, interbodily pleasure in exchange for the visible, outward signification of 'pleasure'" (Hardy 2009: 10). In collapsing into the same ideological space, the "authentic" tactile pleasures of participation and "inauthentic" pleasure derived from the visual objectification of sex acts, Townsend's memoir is demonstrative of the "blurring of the real and the representational" (Attwood 2010: 6) enacted by the consumption of pornography.

Pornography is, of course, only one site of women's oppression and needs to be placed in context as such. To place too much emphasis on porno-

graphy practices is to ignore the many other ways in which male domination is colluded with and resisted, and the many other means by which women's subordination is perpetuated and challenged. Yet, we have witnessed how Townsend's bestselling, non-fiction erotic memoir celebrates the values of the sex industry, implicating female sexual pleasure as predicated on male power. Most strikingly, Townsend's accounts relay sexual ideologies and encounters in a forthright, distinctly non-literary style, marking a departure in the aesthetic and conceptual trajectory of erotica as defined by novels such as Pauline Reage's *Story of O* (1954) in the twentieth century and extended, in the twenty-first century, by Toni Bentley's *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir*. As Bentley's memoir will constitute the remaining focus of this article, it is first important to discuss how the genre of "literary erotica" functions as a counterpoint to mass-market memoirs such as Townsend's *Breaking the Rules: Confessions of a Bad Girl*. Indeed, while Townsend's work has received scarce critical attention, the lively reception to Reage's *Story of O* (1954) was emblematic of its period, with conservative detractors deeming the novel both obscene and a potential intensifier of, or catalyst to, the prurient desires of a perverse minority. The assumption of many conservative, sexual absolutists has been that to set out intentionally to elicit sexual arousal is despicable, but if the main objective of the work is artistic or scientific, and the possibility of sexual arousal only incidental, then these higher purposes may justify publication. Conservative critics denied Reage's conspicuous literary talent, relegating the text to little more than a source of sensationalist titillation, and thus reflecting a perspective that is common even today: that writing or pictures that are produced with the sole purpose of eliciting sexual arousal have no "redeeming" value. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, liberal critics embraced Reage's work, praising the author's dense passages saturated with symbolism, epiphanies, and quasi-religious transcendence. It is precisely this allusive, literary style that, argue the sexual libertarians, renders the novel art rather than pornography. Yet, even though the responses of conservative and liberal cultural critics appear dichotomised into either a rejection or an acceptance of Reage's work, their positions are morally contiguous. In celebrating the visceral qualities of her eroticism in the context of metaphysics, even the most liberal of critics refused to move far from the roots of sexual absolutism in their accentuation of literary and aesthetic qualities as a justification of any content that might be deemed offensive or steeped in patriarchal constructs.

Similarly, Georges Bataille, Reage's predecessor and one of the foremost practitioners of literary eroticism, commented that the erotic is "the domain of violence, of violation" and always "entails a breaking down of established patterns and of the regulated social order" (Bataille [1954]2001: 8). His fiction is similarly radical in its location of the erotic as a destructive but ultimately liberating force, one that challenges the boundaries of social

norms and etiquette. *Story of the Eye* (1928) delineates Bataille's integration of sex and violence, and is saturated with semen, urine, tears, egg yolks and cat's milk, while his writings on La Villette slaughterhouse are permeated with images of blood and unidentifiable bundles of visceral excess. Even his contemporary, Andre Breton, who was hardly a political reactionary, commented that "M. Bataille professes to wish only to consider in the world that which is vilest, most discouraging and most corrupted, so as to avoid making himself useful for anything specific" (Breton [1924]1998: 127). Breton saw Bataille as the chief architect of a form of dissident surrealism that encouraged a descent into debauchery; Bataille's riposte was to highlight his work's recuperation of subversive desire as encouraging the transformation of matter into metaphor in an ascending movement of sublimation. Similar to Townsend's memoir, Toni Bentley's *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* has not received any critical attention. However dissimilar to Townsend's, it is not a work of popular fiction but rather a twenty-first-century extension of Bataille's aesthetic trajectory, with the author declaring "I came to know God experientially, from being fucked in the ass – over and over and over again" (Bentley 2006: 4). Bentley's memoir explores the spiritual dimension of anal intercourse through physical and metaphysical contexts, which immediately places the text far from Townsend's mass-market memoir targeted at a mainstream audience.

Certainly, in terms of sexual ideologies, Bentley's text demonstrates a postfeminist sensibility that is arguably more empowering than Towsend's but nevertheless predicated on sexual encounters as the only site of empowerment. She condemns the "curious double standard" relating to the attitude of heterosexual men to anal intercourse: "How can they expect a woman to take a cock up her ass when they squeal if anything larger than a pinky finger is waved in their direction?" (Bentley 2006: 115). Like Townsend, we also witness Bentley's uncompromising repudiation of emotional intimacy: "If the sex isn't awesome, or at least fascinating, get out, stop, shift gears, and change direction with minimum discussion" (p. 34). Most prominently, Bentley posits a rejection of heterosexual romantic love, marriage and emotional intimacy, commenting that being a "Mrs" "felt horrendous", while "Ms" represented a "dry, neutered alternative", concluding that the "problem with them all is that what followed was always a man's name" (p. 204). While this may seem a political stance that, in principle, ostensibly rejects the commoditisation of female identity, the author's rejection of monogamy stems from disappointing prior experiences and a fear of emotional submission. The author "caught several men desiring matrimony", "married the best of them" and "found misery to spare" (p. 76). Even prior to marriage, she suspected that the proposals "were more about insecurities and jealousies than about love, more about tying [her] down emotionally when [she] needed tying down physically" (p. 76). After marriage, she chooses a non-monogamous, physical relationship

with a man she loves, aware that exclusivity requires a form of emotional surrender, stating, "I loved him too much. I was too vulnerable to give myself entirely to him" (p. 176). Instead, she rationalises that, in the absence of "a commitment that might be broken", there is no danger of the "self-righteous pain and anger of betrayal" (p. 176) that infidelity would precipitate. As such, she begins a relationship with "A-Man" that never extends beyond the boundaries of non-monogamous anal sex, choosing a sexual practice that the author situates as a feminist strategy: "a pussy, genetically, wants impregnation, the juice; an asshole wants the ride of its life" (p. 126). For the author, she and her lover "exist in the land beyond the intercourse that breeds babies" (p. 83).

Bentley's rejection of the institution of marriage, monogamy, emotional intimacy and decentring of vaginal intercourse all imply an affinity with the postfeminist ethos tentatively and somewhat misguidedly disseminated in the memoirs of Townsend. Yet, the reductionism of her comment that "vaginas are for babies, asses for art" (p. 126) subtly implicates her ideology as one grounded in the rhetoric of biological essentialism, and we observe this further in her adulation of conventional masculinity. Bentley admires her lover's "the balls to want and try and dare to fuck [her] in [her] tiny, tight ass" (p. 78), and audaciously positions second-wave feminism as culpable in the disintegration of traditional masculinity: "Defusing the bomb is a challenge to the feminist man, and arrogance makes him think he can succeed. He can't. It's my hurt, my pain, and who are you to take it from me? I don't need rescuing, I don't need pity, I don't need opinions, I need fucking – and maybe a nice little spanking for indulging my anger" (p. 137). The author does not require a man to attempt psychological understanding or emotional intimacy, but rather to uphold what she perceives to be his rightful place in the dominant sexual hierarchy. For a man to do any less than to sexually dominate her, positions him as a biological anomaly that can, in the twenty-first century, hide his genetic deficiency under the umbrella of feminist enlightenment: "women's liberation has fostered what appears to be an entire generation of this particular man: the male masochist who can now masquerade, legitimately, as the feminist man" (p. 49). Her resistance to the 1980s ideal of the enlightened "new man" ensures that, throughout the memoir, she assumes a subservient position in all her sexual interactions, first through acting as a vessel for learning and self-awareness: "I learned with him that I am most alive, most observant, and most intelligent when sexually engaged" (p. 31). Ultimately, she finds sexual communication with a man who "was not going to compromise himself for pussy, like so many men do" (p. 176).

It is Bentley's affirmation of sexual essentialism and narrowly defined gender roles that culminates in her positioning of male sexual behaviour as the pre-eminent marker of male identity: "If a man can possess a woman sexually – really possess – he won't need to control her ideas, her opinions,

her clothes, her friends, even her other lovers" (p. 98). The implication here is that male domination in all spheres of life is merely a compensation for a man's inability to assume a position of sexual dominance. Indeed Bentley suggests that male sexual dominance ensures that her lover has "infiltrated the core" (p. 98) of her being, after which female submission in all other aspects of life is inevitable and legitimatised. The author identifies the aftershock of feminist thought as a challenge to sexual empowerment, and positions her sexual pleasure in the convoluted territory between two polar opposites: "Domination – total and complete domination of my being – that is where I find freedom" (p. 98). It is here that Bentley displays that she is an heir of the tradition of erotica developed by Reage and Bataille, by configuring sex as necessarily destructive and liberating, and by identifying feminism as an obstacle to relinquishing control and celebrating the "natural" order of sexual power structures: "He fucks me into my femininity. As a liberated woman, it is the only way I can go there and retain my dignity. Turned over, ass in the air, I have little choice but to succumb and lose my head. This is how I can have an experience my intellect would never allow, a betrayal to Olive Schreiner, Margaret Sanger and Betty Friedan" (p. 7). This betrayal of a history of feminist struggle, both first- and second-wave, is embodied in Bentley's declaration that "[a]ss-fucking a woman is clearly about authority. The man's authority; the woman's complete acceptance of it" (p. 91), demonstrating that Bentley's essentialism remains as rigid as Freud's contention that sadism and masochism, and the contrast between activity and passivity, is a universal and unavoidable characteristic of sexual life (Freud 1987: 24). In a final nod to Freud, Bentley concedes to penis envy: "I reckon every woman wants a cock between her legs, ultimately. The question is: Does she want one of her own, or can she tolerate one belonging to a man?" (p. 42). Her phallocentrism is so strong that she even declares that she "cannot love a cock that cannot dominate [her]", otherwise she retains "too much power" and becomes "totally tyrannical" (p. 128). Bentley resolutely positions women as desiring subordination, while simultaneously positioning herself as a liberated woman. Along with Pat Califia, the author can be identified as among a minority of contemporary feminists who affirm sexual subordination. Califia locates this in the parameters of the wider feminist community by stating that "[a] woman who deliberately seeks out a sexual situation in which she can be helpless is a traitor in their eyes" largely because her movement has "been trying to persuade people for years that women are not naturally masochistic" (Califia 1996: 234). Yet, Califia makes the astute point that subordination and masochism in the sexual realm cannot necessarily be transferred to the non-sexual sphere, either private or political: "A sexual masochist probably doesn't want to be raped, battered, discriminated against in her job, or kept down by the system. Her desire to act out a specific sexual fantasy is very different from the

pseudopsychiatric dictum that a woman's world is bound by housework, intercourse, and childbirth" (p. 235). By positing submission in the locale of sexual relations but maintaining control in other aspects of public and private life, Bentley complicates the divisive issue of whether or not sexual submission is indeed counterproductive to female agency, or indeed detrimental to women's experience in the wider social world.

The rhetoric of postfeminism is a rhetoric of liberal humanism; it embraces a "flexible ideology which can be adapted to suit individual needs and desires" (Gamble 1998: 44), and as such, refuses to be critical of women's choices, even in the context of sexual choices that ostensibly rebuke more traditional forms of feminism. Indeed, Walter has commented that the hypersexuality of contemporary Western culture is "constantly excused by reference to free choice", even though this is "not necessarily how it is experienced by young women" (Walter 2010: 75). As women's liberation in the 21st century has become so inextricably linked to sexual liberation, many young women feel that "any questioning of this hyper-sexual culture will only be seen as prudishness" (p. 82). Just as in the 19th century, when the promiscuous woman was presented in the dominant culture as marginal and to be condemned, so now, a girl who has decided to delay sexual activity until she finds a true emotional commitment can be relegated to the margins and silenced. It is here, then, that Bentley's text bears witness to the complexity of sexual decision-making, demonstrating the dubious nature of postfeminism's attestation of sexual choice and sexual promiscuity as liberating. Even though Bentley appears to be in supreme command of her sexual decision-making, she reveals that, in the early part of her life, freedom of choice was not always apparent: "It never occurred to me that you didn't have to become monogamous the moment a guy put his tongue in your mouth. That's just the way it was – sealed with saliva – and I didn't have enough experience to think that I might have a choice in the matter" (Bentley 2006: 24). The catastrophic effect of this compromising of choice is later evident in the author's post-intercourse confession: "He was the thirty-third man, and the only one I really liked to fuck. The others were just men and I allowed it. Resentfully" (p. 94). Feminist research into, and women's reflections upon, experiences of sexual violence long ago established that rape involves the sexualisation of power; the fusing in men's imaginations of sexual pleasure with domination and control. As Bentley does not take pleasure from all but one of her sexual encounters, her confession strongly implies that in a culture where the dominant definition of sex is the taking of pleasure from women by men, rape is an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not a violation of those norms. As such, for the majority of women, freedom of choice and freedom of sexual pleasure comprise the exception rather than the rule.

Over the past forty years, feminists have sought to radically change the manner in which sexual relations are played out between the sexes. They

have sought to decentre penetration, to reconceptualise it in ways which do not position women as passive objects, and to change the manner in which women engage in sex with men. Feminists have argued that the possibility of empowerment for young women entails critical consideration of how women can respond to the pressures on them to treat sexual encounters as primarily for fulfilling men's sexual needs. They have challenged the lack of a positive model of female sexuality, and argued that women must critically reflect on their sexual experiences in order to gain control of their responses to men. By questioning monogamy and supporting sexual freedom, writers associated with the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s undoubtedly created a real shift in the way that women perceived their sexuality. This was a positive shift, in that it allowed women to discuss physical realities and lay claim to their own desires and pleasure. Female sexuality was discussed with an honesty that had never been witnessed before, as writers detailed orgasms, masturbation, period and position without shame. In this article, I have aimed to illustrate how the memoirs of Townsend and Bentley are heirs of a tradition of frank sexual discussion, and how their work demonstrates a plethora of postfeminist sensibilities; the centralisation of women's desire for sex without emotional intimacy, the rejection of the codes of heterosexual romantic love, and the relegation of men to the sphere of sexual objects. All of this can be read as women's progress in the drive to invert the inequalities in the male-dominated history of sexual relations. Yet, I have also aimed to illustrate how, despite the ostensibly liberating ethos of each of the memoirs, all remain trapped within male-dominated discourses that are limiting to women's empowerment; not merely in their saturation and acceptance of the values of the sex industry, but most importantly, in their eroticisation of male power, self-objectification and repudiation of earlier forms of feminism. The memoirs have demonstrated that even when women are powerfully vocalising their sexual preferences and aspirations, many of these desires remain unrealised in the context of real-world sexual encounters, and are replaced by a submission to the sexual inclinations of their male counterparts. The memoirs suggest that whereas it is very easy for 21st-century women to express their sexual desires, it is infinitely more difficult to specify what, exactly, is meant by empowerment in sexual relations when women are subordinate to men.

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