Letters to the Editor as "Archives of Feeling": *On Our Backs* Magazine and the Sex Wars

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ABSTRACT: The sex wars were a set of debates at their height during the 1980s that centered on the politics of sexual practices such as sadism/masochism and pornography. Though some argued that such practices were inherently patriarchal, others adopted anti-censorship positions, arguing that feminists ought not to stigmatize different forms of consensual sexual expression. *On Our Backs* (1984–2006) emerged in the midst of the sex wars as a nationally circulating lesbian magazine that foregrounded and helped to cultivate sex-positive lesbian public cultures. This essay analyzes the letters section of *On Our Backs,* which Groeneveld reads as an example of what Ann Cvetkovich calls an "archive of feelings" that gives us insight into the everyday ways that the sex wars permeated lesbian and feminist communities in the 1980s. Letters provide documentation of social and political moments written not from the perspective of reporters, theorists, or social movement rock stars, but from people who felt compelled enough to respond to a story or an image.

KEYWORDS: *On Our Backs,* feminist periodicals, letters to the editor, feminist sex wars, archival research, archive of feelings, Ann Cvetkovich

This essay analyzes the roles that the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* (1984–2006) played in the sex wars in helping to cultivate sex-positive lesbian public cultures. The sex wars were a set of debates at their height during the 1980s that centered on the politics of sexual practices, such as sadism/masochism (S/M) and pornography. Some feminists believed that these practices were patriarchal and oppressed women, while others adopted an anti-censorship position, arguing that feminists ought not to stigmatize different forms of consensual sexual expression. The anti-censorship position became known as a "sex-positive" feminist approach to sexuality. Sex-positive feminism works toward destigmatizing sexual practices,

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such as S/M, sex work, and pornography; promoting the importance of sexual consent; and valuing pleasure as a significant part of sexuality.

These debates were mediated through a variety of print, such as feminist and lesbian periodicals, conference programs, and pamphlets. *On Our Backs* (*OOB*) played a vital role in providing a voice for sex-positive feminism by fostering pedagogies of pleasure among its readership. For example, the first issue of the magazine contained a full-page pin-up-style centerfold picture of Honey Lee Cottrell with the caption "Bulldagger of the Season." The magazine then published in their next issue a letter from one reader, who asked, "Was the Bulldagger of the Season a real center-fold for perusal—excitement—or as a satire on heterosexual centerfolds. Please excuse my naivete because I really don't understand."[1] In *OOB*'s response to this letter, editor Susie Bright encouraged readers to enjoy viewing the image in ways that work to destigmatize sexually explicit media: "Bulldagger of the Season was meant to tickle your funnybone," she assures the reader, "as well as your clit."[2] The editorial response to this letter is an articulation of sex-positive feminism, an affirmation of the possibilities of finding pleasure and excitement in pornographic images.

I begin with this reader-editor exchange because it highlights the central role that *OOB* played in fostering dialogue about identity and sexuality during a period when many lesbians, particularly those involved with feminism, felt that their sexual preferences were being policed by others within their own movement. The magazine worked to destigmatize lesbian sexualities, showing a range of representations within its pages and taking a broad and inclusive perspective on lesbian identity. Moreover, this reader-editor exchange begins to speak to the importance of magazines for social movements and minoritized identity groups. *OOB* provided a forum for readers to articulate how they felt about the sex wars and to cultivate a broader lesbian public culture that overlapped with, but was distinct from, lesbian feminism. Read retrospectively, these letters provide an "archive of feelings" about the sex wars and a way of mapping the development of lesbian public cultures within the United States, and beyond, during the 1980s.[3]

On Our Backs and Sex-Positive Feminism

The first issue of *OOB* was published in the summer of 1984 in San Francisco by Myrna Elana and Debi Sundahl, who were also the coeditors. Sex educator and advocate Susie Bright was listed as a contributing editor. Sundahl continued as sole publisher from 1984 to 1994 with Bright as editor from 1984 to 1991. Nan Kinney was listed on the masthead in various roles (administrative services, distribution, circulation) from the third (Winter 1985) issue onward, before settling in as associate publisher from 1988 to 1994. Other contributors to the first issue included Pat (now Patrick) Califia, Tee Corinne, Honey Lee Cotrell, and Jewelle Gomez.

Fundraising efforts included a dance party featuring "the sleazy music of DJ Gayle Rubin."[4] Many of the participants in this first issue were—or became—noted queer theorists, award-winning authors, and artists; many also became frequent contributors to the magazine.

The name of *On Our Backs* was a sendup of a well-known radical feminist magazine called *off our backs* (1970–2008). During the 1980s, *off our backs* provided coverage of the debates about the sex wars; however, many sex radicals felt that coverage in *off our backs* was biased against pornography. *On Our Backs* implicitly represents *off our backs* as anti-sex. Many anti-pornography feminists objected to the labeling of those on the other side of the debate as sex-positive because of its implicit characterization of themselves as "sex-negative" or anti-sex itself. Indeed, some critical work on the sex wars eschews the war metaphor altogether, because it calcifies a set of complex positions on sex and sexuality into two discrete camps. Nonetheless, as Lisa Duggan writes of these debates, "the battles were bitter, often personal and vituperative."[5] Through its title alone, *OOB* signaled its clear alliance with anti-censorship feminisms and celebrates the sexual pleasure that might be gained while lying on one's back.

OOB was part of a small cohort of lesbian magazines established in the early 1980s. *Bad Attitude* (1984–2004) was a Boston-based lesbian sex magazine, and *Lesbian Contradiction* (1982–94) was, like *On Our Backs,* based out of San Francisco. *Bad Attitude* has the dubious distinction of having been the subject of the first prosecution under Canada's revised 1992 obscenity law (known as the Butler decision), which was drafted with the input of anti-pornography feminists.[6] *Lesbian Contradiction,* which dubbed itself "a journal of irreverent feminism by and for women," did not explicitly brand itself as a sex magazine; however, in her study of lesbian periodicals, Jan Whitt characterizes the magazine as a "more erotic publication" in a vein similar to *On Our Backs*.[7] As one of these "more erotic" publications, *OOB* included sexually explicit photographs and illustrations across approximately one-third of its fifty-two-page inaugural issue; the other two-thirds of the magazine were split roughly equally between advertisements and written pieces, with most of the latter being erotic fiction.

OOB was a departure from other lesbian periodicals like the *Ladder, Focus: A Journal for Gay Women, Sinister Wisdom, Amazon Quarterly, Conditions,* and *Lesbian Tide.* The *Ladder* (1956–72) was the official publication of the homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis. The vision of this magazine was a "national lesbian magazine in the spirit of *Newsweek.*"[8] Similarly, *Focus: A Journal for Gay Women* (1971–83) was the official organ of the Boston Daughters of Bilitis chapter.[9] *Sinister Wisdom, Amazon Quarterly, Conditions,* and *Lesbian Tide* were journal-style publications linked with lesbian feminism and included book reviews, creative writing, poetry, and feature articles.

An articulation of a form of sex-positive feminism is present in the first issue of *OOB,* in Susie Bright's inaugural advice column for lesbians, "Toys for Us." The subject of this column is dildos. Bright writes: "Ladies, the discreet, complete and

definitive on dildos is this: penetration is as heterosexual as kissing! . . . Fucking knows no gender. . . . penises can only be compared to dildos in the sense that they take up space."[10] The article destigmatizes the use of penetrative sex toys within lesbian relationships and works to decouple certain kinds of sex acts from sexual identity: specifically, enjoying penetration should not be considered at odds with lesbianism.

Bright's advice column responded to a lesbian feminist discourse that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s, which saw lesbian identity as a form of resistance to patriarchal norms. One of the consequences of this discourse was that it implicitly shamed lesbians who engaged in and enjoyed activities like using dildos as complicit with patriarchy. Although dildos are not penises, some lesbian feminists conflated penetration, particularly with sex toys, with heterosexuality, and, in defining lesbianism as a political identity, some lesbian feminists were seen as desexualizing lesbian identity. Writing retrospectively about the sex wars, Joan Nestle recalls, for example, being infuriated by Adrienne Rich's famous essay on "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" because of her perception of its "anti-sex stance."[11] Susie Bright's inaugural advice column in *On Our Backs* thus not only provides advice about dildos, but also represents an important and bold intervention into the politics of lesbian sexuality as it intersected with feminist politics in the 1980s.

In addition to Bright's advice column, the inaugural issue of *OOB* also contains a satirical article that makes clear the salience of the sex wars in 1984. The article focuses on an imaginary group called Concerned Women against Perverted Individuals (known by their acronym, the homophonous CWAPI) and refers to one its key members, Andrix Workin. Anyone familiar with the debates about the sex wars would be able to recognize CWAPI as a stand-in for Women Against Pornography (WAP) and Andrix Workin as a caricatured version of radical feminist Andrea Dworkin. Titled "A Cup of Tea Is Preferable to Any Sexual Encounter," the article reports on a fictional protest held by CWAPI in front of the offices of a "feminist/lesbian/SM support group," accusing the group of discrediting "the feminist movement in the eyes of society."[12] This skewering of anti-pornography feminisms attacks a certain brand of lesbian feminism for its adherence to a politics of respectability. Though satirical, the article also contains a painful truth about the unintended effects of anti-pornography politics: that lesbians and feminists who found watching and participating in pornography or S/M pleasurable felt either closeted about their sexual preferences or were ostracized by the movement.

OOB foregrounded a sex-positive feminist discourse from its first issue, putting this discourse into national circulation among a lesbian readership. Readers took part in the conversation about the pornographic representation of lesbian sexualities—especially through letters to the editor like the one discussed in my opening. My analysis looks at the first five years of *OOB* letters (1984–89). The magazine established a two-page letters to the editor section in their second issue, which appeared consistently until the magazine's July/August 1992 issue, when

the section was reduced to one page. For the first five years of publication, every issue of the magazine contained implicit or explicit references to debates associated with the sex wars in the letters to the editor section. In the summer of 1989, when the magazine published its fifth anniversary issue, it was, at that point, possible for the publishers to write more retrospectively about the sex wars.[13] Although the magazine continued to publish letters from readers with regards to the politics of pornography and S/M, they did so less frequently after the fifth anniversary issue. The letters to the editor section of *OOB* became, especially during the first five years, a forum for readers to express their feelings about the sex wars and to build a different kind of lesbian public culture, which they did in every issue of the magazine for those first five years and beyond. In this sense, we can read the letters to the editor sections as a form of archive.

Magazines as Archives

In recent years, cultural studies scholars have turned to the archive as a key concept for helping us understand and "make sense of" the past. Michel Foucault argues that the archive is discursive, in that archives tell only particular and interested kinds of stories about the past.[14] For minoritized groups like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) folks, archiving histories of social movements takes on additional importance, given that these histories are often excluded from the wider public sphere. LGBTQ histories, for example, aren't always covered in school curricula, memorialized in public spaces, or represented in wider national narratives. Sometimes, families or family members of deceased LGBTQ folks may even destroy documentation of that person's contributions to LGBTQ movements. According to Alana Kumbier, "in lesbian and queer subcultures individuals may become record-keepers within their communities, assuming the responsibilities of archivists in official or unofficial capacities."[15] While *OOB* did not set out with the primary intention of documenting lesbian histories, it is clear the magazine recognized the importance of preserving the publication, and indeed the magazine serves as an important archive of lesbian culture, news, images, and debates of the 1980s. As early as 1987, a mere three years after their inaugural issue, *OOB* donated materials to the Tennessee Lesbian Archives.

If we are to see a magazine, or magazine series, as an archive, then *OOB*'s letters to the editor constitute a specific form of archive-within-the-archive. These letters document a range of positive and negative responses to the magazine, touch on political debates, provide literary criticism on stories, and analyze the images in the magazine. Moreover, they do so through the language of lived experience: the letters provide insight into how readers were thinking about the material and debates that they encountered within the magazine, and how those things manifested in their everyday lives. These letters are from readers who took the time

to write in, suggesting a level of passion and care about the magazine's content. Many *OOB* readers also included the location from which they were writing; in this way, the letters provide a sense of the geographical reach of the magazine and of how regional differences could significantly shift how women experienced their lesbian identities.

Naming magazines as archives and letters to the editor as an archive within-the-archive risks simply adding magazines and letters to the editor to an ever-expanding list of items that can be considered archival in quality. In her writing on the archival turn in feminist thought, Kate Eichhorn argues that "definitions of the archive continue to loosen," cautioning that "If any collection can be an archive, we risk losing sight of an important distinction between carefully constructed and highly regulated collections that produce 'official' narratives about the past . . . and random collections of objects and documents that bring pleasure to the collector but have little or no impact on the larger order of things."[16] Eichhorn's caution is valid, but thinking about letters to the editor sections of magazines as archives provides a way of valuing and highlighting this generic feature that is so significant to magazine production. Particularly in the case of magazines related to social movements, letters to the editor can provide access to the narratives that people used to construct, understand, and analyze social and political phenomena. And letters to the editor *are* archives insofar as these sections are curated by editors.

In examining the letters to the editor sections of *OOB,* we can see direct evidence of construction and regulation. For example, the editors often paired readers' letters. In almost every issue, a letter complaining about the overrepresentation of particular forms of sexuality is followed by a letter requesting more of that same form of sexuality. In this sense, *OOB* editors juxtaposed letters in order to educate their readers that what is a turnoff for one lesbian may be exactly what another lesbian enjoys seeing. This was especially the case for the sexual practice that came under the closest criticism, S/M.

Documents in the *OOB* archives at Brown University reveal other evidence of curation. A folder marked "Letters 1989" contains a letter from D (publisher Debi Sundahl) to S (editor Susie Bright) that reads: "I don't know. Want to do anything with this letters page? Be kind of nice to group all the Dworkinites together and let them have it."[17] The note is attached to a stack of letters to the editor and an editor's response that have been typed into one document for potential publication. Someone—presumably Sundahl—has highlighted passages from these letters, such as "the degradation explicit in your photographs strikes me," "Please cancel my subscription to *On Our Backs,*" and "I strongly object to your articles and pictures."[18] The letters are accompanied by an editorial response from Sundahl that reads, "to the women who throw around general terms like lesbians = freedom, not bondage, in response to s/m or 'degradation, slavery, and violence in our pictorials,' we say what we always have: you are indoctrinated with Dworkinite dogma and cannot hear. You need de programming. Go away."[19] Another handwritten

note from Sundahl on the top of this page states, "I don't want [this editorial response] printed right now. However, it summarizes the situation as I see it now. Please brief yourselves and file in your Business Plan folders for discussion later."[20]

The grouping of these letters together—and Sundahl's querying of Bright, with regard to a response—indicates awareness on the part of staff that pairing or grouping letters could help produce a particular kind of narrative about the sex wars. Sundahl's instruction to file her editorial response in "Business Plan folders" also suggests that a sternly worded or provocative response to readers critical of representations of S/M could help the magazine carve out a pro-sex identity that was also potentially marketable.

The archival quality of letters to the editor is especially important because they provide documentation of social and political moments written not from the perspective of reporters, theorists, or social movement rock stars, but from people who felt compelled to respond to a story or an image. In this sense, letters to the editor serve as an archive of feelings. To see ephemera like readers' letters to *OOB* as an archive of feelings is to read cultural texts, as Ann Cvetkovich puts it, "as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[21] Readers' letters to *OOB* function as archives of feelings not only because they contain evidence of readers' emotional attachments to the magazine and to the lesbian public it fostered, but also because of their emotional curation on the part of editors. Readers' responses to other letters indicate the kinds of feelings (love, anger, frustration, etc.) that could circulate through the magazine.

Magazine studies is a key site for investigating *how social movements feel.* In her analysis of the magazine *Heresies,* Michelle Meagher argues that "Attending to . . . feelings [within magazine analysis] permits contemporary scholars to expand our understandings of feminism's recent past by asking questions not only about what feminist activists might have done and thought in the 1980s, but also how they felt about their work and the new forms of relationship that it both fostered and demanded."[22] Prior to the widespread use of the Internet, magazines played a significant role in helping to circulate social movement discourse, attract new participants, and keep active participants involved. In her writing on the UK feminist movement, Laurel Forster argues that "the significance of the printed word to the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) can hardly be overstated."[23] Magazine studies is also an ideal site for analyzing the impact of social movements because the epistolary form of the letter to the editor prominent in some magazines is often motivated by a strong feelings, like love, fury, or confusion.

One example of how the letters in *On Our Backs* provide access to an archive of feelings can be found in examining a letter published in the magazine's third issue. A reader asks: "Can anyone ever know how precious this magazine is to me? All this love I have for women, and all this pride I have for being lesbian was just all bottled up for so many years. . . . Your magazine has supported my feelings and recent discoveries that sex is okay. . . . Thanks for bringing lesbian

lust out of the closet!"[24] This letter celebrates *On Our Backs* because the magazine provided the reader with positive affirmation and support for a sexualized lesbian identity, fostering a sense of pride. While this reader does not explicitly reference lesbian feminism, I speculate that the reader's discovery that sex and lesbian lust is okay (i.e., not shameful) may be linked to how lesbian sexual practices were often framed as more egalitarian than sexual practices associated with heterosexuality; that is, a consequence of lesbian feminism was the demonization of particular kinds of sexual practices, such as lust (sex without love), as patriarchal. Amber Hollibaugh argues that "lesbianism (since it exists outside the institution of heterosexuality) came to be seen as the practice of feminism," but, as such, "questions of power in bed" in feminist discourse were underexamined because if "you might fantasize yourself in a role a man might perform or a woman in reaction to a man, this makes you sick, fucked-up, and you had better go and change it."[25] *On Our Backs* helped shift understandings of lesbian identity: thinking of letters to the editor as an archive of feelings helps us understand better the *impact* of this shift on lesbian lives in the 1980s.

On Our Backs letters are an archive that illuminates how a lesbian community distinct from, but overlapping with, academic and activist circles was engaging in debates about sex, sexuality, and feminism. In her writing on the sex wars, Kathleen Martindale argues that the sex wars "set the terms and the agenda for contemporary feminist and lesbian discourses on sexuality and sexual representation."[26] Despite the impact of the debates about the sex wars, Martindale also asserts that the sex wars were "ironically disembodied" and "largely fought by (white, American) intellectuals over books and ideas and then were rehashed in more books and scholarly articles."[27] While Martindale argues that the sex wars ignited, by and large, contentious debate among lesbian and feminist intellectuals, that was perhaps somewhat unhinged from the everyday lives of a wider lesbian and feminist community, letters to the editor of *On Our Backs* reveal a rich discussion of the politics of sexuality that filtered into the lives of many lesbians and bisexual women in the 1980s.

The Geographies of Lesbian Public Cultures

Magazines are incredibly heterogeneous texts. It is not surprising that the French *magasin* means a "storehouse or repository." Yet magazines are not just storehouses or repositories of information. Because of their heterogeneity, magazines also provide readers with a sense of a multifaceted conversation that is unfolding between editors and readers, authors and readers, as well as among readers and among authors across articles, images, and advertisements. As Laurel Forster puts it, "magazines and periodicals express an exchange of ideas, not a static pronouncement."[28]

This sense of a conversation makes magazines important sites for fostering public cultures—especially prior to the widespread use of the Internet.

This understanding of public cultures derives from theories of publics and counterpublics, as well as from Raymond Williams's theorization of culture as "a way of life."[29] Public cultures are lifeworlds cultivated through discursive relationships. For minoritized and marginalized identity groups, public cultures are important because they provide community, support, and representation. We see evidence of this importance through readers' letters to *On Our Backs.* For example, one reader exclaimed, "Thought I was the only dyke in the whole damn world who loves erotica! . . . Guess this means I'm out of the closet again, doesn't it!"[30] For sexual minority groups, including lesbians, it is important to feel that *you are not only one,* and within that minority, it is also important to feel like your sexual desires do not make you freakish (unless you wish to style yourself as such). The representation of lesbian sex in *On Our Backs,* therefore, was certainly about fostering pleasure and inciting sexual arousal, but it was also about making lesbians feel that they were not alone in their sexual desires.

OOB cultivated a lesbian public culture at regional, national, and international levels through its circulation. For lesbians in rural areas of the United States or less queer-friendly regions of the nation, the magazine provided sense of connection to other lesbians. For example, as one reader explained, "I'm just a lone dyke trapped in Beaumont, Texas, a town not exactly sympathetic to lesbian rights. Whenever your magazine arrives, I have my own little lesbian oasis right here in the desert."[31] For this reader and others, *OOB* provided a vision of lesbian community that they did not have access to in their geographical locations, something especially important beyond the gay neighborhoods of major urban centers. The magazine asserted that there *was* such a thing as lesbian culture, and it provided readers access to the representational practices of that culture. Letters like the one above both demonstrate the important role that *OOB* played in the lives of readers from outside of major coastal urban centers of the United States and give insight into the cultural climate of regions across the United States.

As a magazine, *OOB* was primarily focused on representing a spectrum of lesbian sexualities for the enjoyment of their readers. At a time when many lesbians were actively participating in the feminist movement, however, many readers' letters to the magazine took up the relationship between lesbian and feminist identity. One Australian reader wrote, "It is great to know that outrageous sex occurs not only in my bedroom but across the continent too. I am not a freak or sexually depraved after all. Having had feminist leanings for years I did feel a certain amount of guilt at the way I approached sex. No wonder there are so many miserable political dykes out there."[32] This letter speaks to the ways in which *OOB*'s commitment to representing a range of lesbian sexualities helped readers understand and feel less ashamed or guilty about the pleasure derived from particular kinds of sexual acts. It also speaks to the way in which one effect of feminist politics of the 1980s was to make lesbians feel policed in terms of what kinds of

sexual behavior was constructed as "healthy" for lesbians, what behaviors were constructed as patriarchal.

Other letters from the first five years of *OOB* give insight into the international reach of the magazine. A reader from Montreal, Canada, shared that "The community in Montreal is just as tight-assed as anywhere else: no one seems to be able to say 'dildo' without getting red in the face."[33] This letter, and others like it, shows the interest that readers had in sharing the kinds of community and access to lesbian representation they found (or didn't find) available in their own particular geographic locations. This letter is revealing about the ways that sex acts relying on penetration or relations of dominance and submission were stigmatized within feminist communities as hierarchical and patriarchal.

On Our Backs served as an information-sharing resource, too—letting other lesbians know about lesbian experiences around the world. Other letters during this five-year period describe the status of their lesbian communities, often in comparison with San Francisco, which was considered a kind of lesbian paradise, elevated to near-mythical status. For example, a reader from Seattle, Washington, asked, in relation to a short story: "we wonder how much of this is real because we don't have access to that in our town and you are in San Francisco."[34] The editors do not respond directly to this query, leaving intact a sense of mystique about the city. According to Alyssa Cymene Howe, "because queers have been persecuted many times in many places, . . . territorializing a place, a homeland, can offer a sanctuary from oppression."[35] In readers' letters, San Francisco signifies a real city with a large and vibrant queer culture, but also a kind of utopian space through which lesbians could imagine the possibility of a different, more accepting world.

On Our Backs thus helped foster a new kind of lesbian public and print culture that transcended regional and national boundaries. Letters to the editor during the first five years of publication reflected how readers felt about having a magazine that valued the spectrum of lesbian sexualities. If, as the first pornographic magazine created by and for lesbians, *On Our Backs* represented a departure from conceptions of lesbianism as a political identity, readers' letters provide an archive of feelings about this departure.

Feeling the Sex Wars

In examining eighties-era readers' letters to *OOB*, the *presence* of the sex wars is quite striking, particularly because at least one letter references these debates, either explicitly or implicitly, in every issue published during the magazine's first five years. Many of these letters are personal, connecting political debates about the politics of S/M and definitions of what constitutes a lesbian to individual experiences. For example, one reader reflected: "I'm . . . amazed about how typical I am after a little outside input. . . . I'm not the only one who loves sex as a

lesbian because it feels so good and not because I'm so political."[36] This comment reveals a sense of what it could feel like to be a lesbian in the 1980s, indicating that a salient paradigm of lesbianism at that time was as a political identity. This tension is referenced only implicitly here, yet it demonstrates how *OOB* served a kind of pedagogical role in helping to promote sexual pleasure as a valued part of lesbian identity.

While *OOB*'s name presented the magazine as clearly on the anti-censorship/pro-sex "side" of the sex wars, the letters to the editor section often offered a place for debate about the sex wars—especially about the politics of S/M—but even, on occasion, as a site for direct dialogue. For example, the Fall 1986 issue of the magazine featured this letter from a member of Women Against Pornography: "I've purchased *On Our Backs* magazine and find it to tastefully represent a total picture of wimmin's sexuality. Though I am also a member of WAP (Women Against Pornography) and subscribe to *off our backs* because I see snuff films and child sexual abuse linked to hard core porn. If ever I see death/murder/forced sex/rape or child sexual abuse pictured in *On Our Backs* I'll truly be sickened."[37] The writer continues to outline a sexual scene from *Penthouse* magazine in which an Asian woman is bound and gagged. In the view of the letter writer, that woman had also been raped, killed, and dismembered. Presumably, the letter writer knew of this scene via WAP; at the time, WAP was using slideshows that featured images from hardcore pornography as part of its national educational campaign that sought to convince women that pornography was a form of sexual violence. The letter thus gives us insight into some of the discourses that were circulating about pornography in the 1980s from the perspective of anti-porn activists. It also demonstrates that not all feminists were squarely in one camp or the other when it came to the sex wars: while these debates were divisive, some women attempted to inhabit both sides.

The extensive editorial response to this letter shows the pedagogical role that *OOB* played in the sex wars. First, the editor (Susie Bright) makes a distinction between violence and sex, stating: "You will never see death, murder, rape, or child abuse depicted in On Our Backs because we are a sex magazine. Death, murder, rape, and child abuse is violent criminal activity."[38] Violent acts are implicitly defined in this statement as nonconsensual, while sex is implicitly framed as always consensual. In contrast, WAP's position on pornography and sexual violence was informed by the view that consent within heterosexual relations is always already a coercive context. Further, in WAP's view, pornography—particularly hardcore porn—was itself a form of violence against women and children.

WAP sought to link the consumption of pornography to acts of sexual violence perpetrated by men. The editorial response speaks to this link by countering that "[Sexually violent] actions have no more to do with sex and sex magazines than maiming and death from auto accidents have to do with auto magazines. WAP and off our backs have formed an entire political theory on the assumption that sex equals violence. However, Susan Brownmiller, feminist author of a

book on rape entitled 'Against Our Will,' identified rape as an act of violence, not sex."[39] It is significant that the editorial response uses Brownmiller in its defense of pornography because Brownmiller was actually a co-founder of WAP. Bright's use of Brownmiller can be read as an attempt to dismantle the logic of WAP with the arguments of one of its own, even though, by the 1980s, WAP's philosophies had become more closely aligned with the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, both of whom had made far less of a distinction between violence and (hetero) sex. Bright's identification of Brownmiller as a *feminist* author effectively asserts that *On Our Backs* should not be understood as an anti-feminist magazine. The exchange highlights some of the key differences in perspectives between anti-pornography and pro-sex feminisms: in WAP's view, pornography and violence are inseparable, whereas *On Our Backs* delinks actual violence from representations of violence.

The position of *On Our Backs* on pornography (even pornography that depicts violence and that might be distasteful to many women) is made clear in Bright's final statement to the WAP letter writer about the *Penthouse* magazine spread: "The Asian woman in *Penthouse* was not dead. She was not raped, nor were her limbs dismembered. . . . The actresses and models [in pornography] are alive, vital, and actively lend their creative talents to such work."[40] In this statement, another key tension between anti-pornography and pro-sex feminisms is made clear: anti-pornography feminism tends to frame women who participate in pornography as victims and victimized in the process of making pornography. In contrast, pro-sex feminism emphasizes the agency of women who participate in pornography, arguing that nonconsensual sex acts aren't pornography at all, but violence.

The sex wars are often described as divisive, but the specificities of *how* the sex wars were so acrimonious are often underexamined. Letters to the editor of *On Our Backs* give a sense of the tangible and personal ways that people's lives were affected by these debates. One letter writer wrote in to discuss her experience at a WAP slide show presentation on "women's sexuality" that featured images from *OOB* of labia piercings, which were described by WAP as "'masochistic acts of vaginal mutilation.'"[41] The fact that WAP chapters included materials from *OOB* in their slide presentations is indicative of how rancorous the debates about the sex wars had become by 1986. The effect of WAP's presentation on the reader ironically was to mimic the very things the organization wished to combat. The reader felt "exploited and objectified" by WAP itself, rather than by the images from *OOB*.[42]

Outrage and disgust characterized the emotional tenor of both sides of the pornography debates, but in the archive of feelings, there is also a sense of sadness. Two readers write to *OOB*: "My heart goes out to those who have closed their minds and legs to incredible opportunities for exciting, creative sex. . . . I have come to believe that some of our numbers have completely forgotten what lesbianism is *all* about, or for that matter, feminism, and freedom of expression."[43] This letter is framed by a sense of loss, both collective and personal. The perspectives of anti-pornography advocates are marked as a kind of personal failure to understand the pleasures that might be found in consuming sexual images or

stories. But the larger losses that these readers signal are of unity and a sense of community, both lesbian and feminist.

Other readers of *OOB* offered their own theories about why the conflict between anti-pornography and pro-sex feminists had escalated. Letter writers often theorize anti-pornography activism as emerging out of a kind of fear. One reader asserted, "I think the women who criticize *OOB* are just afraid of the revealing nature of S/M. They trash it out of fear of their own possibilities instead of politics."[44] The impetus to psychologize the motivations of anti-pornography activists is born of a desire to both understand anti-porn activism and to promote some form of sympathy for the anti-pornography side of the sex wars debates.

Reading *OOB* letters as archives of feelings gives us insight into *how* the sex wars were debated. These letters provide accounts of tensions that readers felt within themselves and with others and how they felt about these debates. *OOB* was meaningful for lesbians who felt alienated from their own communities because they couldn't square their sexual desires with the messaging within that community about what a "healthy" lesbian sexuality ought to look like. *OOB* sought to build new lesbian public cultures based on sex-positive feminist principles of consent and pleasure, and the magazine had a significant impact in shaping this form of feminist discourse.

Conclusion

Reading early letters to the editor of *OOB* as an archive of feelings gives us insight into the everyday ways that the sex wars permeated lesbian and feminist communities in the 1980s. These letters reveal how lesbians were thinking about their relationship to feminism and sexuality and the relationship between sexuality and politics. *OOB* can also be seen as a pedagogical project, educating its readers about the pleasures of lesbian sex and unhinging particular kinds of sexual practices from specific sexual identities. The approach developed by *OOB* contributed to the development of sex-positive feminist and queer approaches to sexuality, approaches that continue to resonate into our current moment.

Magazines like *OOB* were a crucial part of social movements prior to the widespread use of the Internet, providing information, support, and a sense of belonging to readers outside of major urban centers. This sense of connection and community is important for social movements to achieve broad-based visibility and support. Social movements are successful because of the people who participate in them, and media play a major role in facilitating participation and a sense of belonging to larger, national or international conversations. Because of the generic conventions of the medium, the magazine lends itself particularly well to this kind of community building. The act of reading a magazine, therefore, is about far more than simply consuming information or entertainment: it is a personal and intimate activity closely tied to individual and collective identity formation.

NOTES

[1] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 3.

[2] Editorial response, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 5.

[3] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[4] Unattributed author, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 5.

[5] Lisa Duggan, "Introduction," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture,* ed. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

[6] Duggan, "Introduction," 9.

[7] Jan Whitt, "A 'Labor from the Heart': Lesbian Magazines from 1947–1994," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5, no. 1–2 (2001): 231.

[8] Julie Enszer, "The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives: Lesbian-Feminist Print Culture from 1969 through 1989" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 368.

[9] Jan Whitt, "A 'Labor from the Heart,': Lesbian Magazines from 1947–1994," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 5, no. 1–2 (2001): 241.

[10] Susie Bright, "Toys for Us," *On Our Backs* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 13.

[11] Joan Nestle, "Wars and Thinking," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 52.

[12] "A Cup of Tea Is Preferable to Any Sexual Encounter," *On Our Backs* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 23.

[13] Debi Sundhal and Nan Kinney, "From the Desk of the Publishers," *On Our Backs* 6, no. 1 (September–October 1989): 3–4, 41.

[14] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.

[15] Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 23.

[16] Kate Eichhorn, "Archival Genres: Gathering Texts and Reading Spaces," *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal of Visual Culture* 12 (May 2008): 1, 3.

[17] Debi Sundahl, Note to Susie Bright, ca. 1989 *On Our Backs* Archive, Box 8, Folder 35, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.

[18] Letters to the Editor, ca. 1989, *On Our Backs* Archive, Box 8, Folder 35, John Hay Library.

[19] Debi Sundahl, Editorial Response, ca. 1989, *On Our Backs* Archive, Box 8, Folder 35, John Hay Library.

[20] Debi Sundahl, Note, ca. 1989, *On Our Backs* Archive, Box 8, Folder 35, John Hay Library.

[21] Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 7.

[22] Michelle Meagher, "Difficult, Messy, Nasty, and Sensational: Feminist Collaboration on *Heresies* (1977–1993)," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 4 (2014): 590.

[23] Laurel Forster, "Spreading the Word: Feminist Print Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement," *Women's History Review* 25, no. 2 (2016): 812.

[24] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1984): 5.

[25] Amber Hollibaugh, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," in *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 72, 74.

[26] Kathleen Martindale, *Un/Popular Culture: Lesbian Writing after the Sex Wars* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 7.

[27] Martindale, *Un/Popular Culture.*

[28] Laurel Forster, *Magazine Movements: Women's Culture, Feminisms, and Media Form* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 5.

[29] Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 88.

[30] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 3.

[31] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 3.

[32] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 2, no. 4 (Spring 1986): 5.

[33] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 4, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 3.

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[38] Editorial response, *On Our Backs* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 5.
[39] Editorial response, *On Our Backs* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 5.
[40] Editorial response, *On Our Backs* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 5.
[41] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 2, no. 5 (Summer 1986): 3.
[42] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 2, no. 5 (Summer 1986): 3.
[43] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1987): 3.
[44] Letter to the editor, *On Our Backs* 1, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3.