Sex and Power in Australian Writing During the Culture Wars, 1993-1997

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In Memory of Richard Thompson

1947-2008
Abstract

I address a selection of texts published in Australia between 1993 and 1997 which engage with feminist debates about sex and power. These texts are important, I argue, because they signpost the historical moment in which the culture wars and globalisation gained force in Australia. A key word in this thesis is ‘framing’. The debates which my texts engage with have (much like the culture wars in general) commonly been framed as conflicts between polarised political factions. These political factions have, in turn, been framed in terms of generations; that is, an ‘older’ feminism is pitted against a ‘newer’ feminism. Each generation of feminists supposedly holds quite different views about sex. I argue that my texts actually provide an insight into how various feminist perspectives on sex diverge and intersect with each other, as well as with certain New Right discourses about sex. My selected texts also suggest how the printed text has helped transport feminism within and outside Australia.

My texts fit into two broad genres, fiction and scholarly non-fiction. The texts are: Helen Garner’s *The First Stone* (1995), Sheila Jeffreys’ *The Lesbian Heresy* (1993), Catharine Lumby’s *Bad Girls* (1997), Linda Jaivin’s *Eat Me* (1995) and Justine Ettler’s *The River Ophelia* (1995). I engage with various critical responses to these texts, including reviews, essays and interviews with the authors. I draw also from a range of theoretical sources. These include analyses of the culture wars by the American theorist Lillian S. Robinson and the Australian scholars McKenzie Wark, David McKnight and Mark Davis. Davis has provided a useful overview of how the metaphor of ‘generational conflict’ circulated in Australian culture during the 1990s. I draw on Arjun Appadurai’s model of “global cultural flows” and Ann Curthoys’ history of feminism in Australia. I engage with research into the increasingly ‘globalised’ nature of Australian writing, as well as a number of feminist works on the relationship between sex and power.
Declaration

This is to certify that

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
ii. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used,
iii. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Jay Thompson
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I dedicate this thesis to my uncle, Richard Thompson, who lost his brave battle against cancer in May 2008. Richard, thanks for your warmth, strength, humour and terrific taste in music.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I address a selection of texts published in Australia between 1993 and 1997 which engage with feminist debates about sex and power. I argue that these texts are significant because they signpost the moment in which the culture wars and globalisation gained ascendance in Australia. The debates which my texts engage with have (like the culture wars in general) commonly been portrayed as conflicts between polarised political factions. I argue that these texts actually provide an insight into how various feminist arguments about sex diverge and intersect with each other, as well as with certain New Right discourses about sex. In advancing this argument, I emphasise how my texts and their critics play out ‘overseas’ debates within an Australian context. I argue that this exemplifies some of the complex ways in which the written text has helped transport feminism within and outside Australia in an era of globalisation.

Writing the Culture Wars

Much scholarly research has a personal element, and this thesis is no exception. Briefly explaining this element will help give the reader a sense of this project’s genesis and aims. I was a teenager during the mid-1990s, and recall reading about the majority of my selected texts in newspapers such as The Age and tabloid magazines such as Who Weekly. I refer here to The First Stone (1995), The River Ophelia (1995), Bad Girls (1997) and Eat Me (1995). I did not fully grasp the debates that these texts engaged with, and indeed had very little exposure to feminist insights (I was aware of the man-hating feminist bull-dyke stereotype). Generational labels were confusing: if the media was to be believed, I occupied that murky territory between ‘Generation X’ and what is now called ‘Generation Y’. Yet I was fascinated by the fact that it was Australian texts about sex that were generating passionate and lively media responses. The concept of ‘cultural cringe’ may have become slightly dated by the mid-1990s, but even still I associated the terms ‘controversy’ and ‘scandal’ with American popular culture.

In the late 1990s, I enrolled in a liberal arts degree at Melbourne University. This, coincidentally, is the institution at which the events described in The First Stone

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1 Who Weekly is the Australian version of the popular U.S. magazine People.
2 I briefly discuss the concept of ‘cultural cringe’ in Chapters One and Six.
unfolded. I took subjects taught by feminist theorist Sheila Jeffreys, and (through curiosity and my own reading) learned about the controversy surrounding her book *The Lesbian Heresy* (1993). Also during my undergraduate years, I encountered many of the critical and scholarly writings about my selected texts and also the debates which they engage with. I came to realise that these texts signposted a particular ‘moment’ in Australian cultural life. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the term ‘moment’ as a “(v)ery brief portion of time, instant … exact point of time” (Sykes, 1980, p.704). By 2004, this moment still held enough fascination for it to become the subject of my doctoral research. Yet I was still nagged by the question of whether Australian writing published between 1993 and 1997 was simply the topic of personal interest or whether it held a broader relevance.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that this moment *does* have a broad relevance. I argue that my selected texts – individually and more importantly as a group – have immense significance to studies of Australian literature, politics and culture. Throughout the thesis, I ask and answer – or go some way towards answering - a series of questions. These questions include, what do my selected texts say about the (interrelated) roles that feminism and writing played in Australia during the mid-1990s? In what ways was the political and cultural landscape of Australia changing during this time? How were these changes related to political and social changes that were taking place on a global scale? Why have the debates which my texts engage with been framed as conflicts between feminist ‘generations’ that hold what seem to be very different perspectives on the relationship between sex and power?

One of my key arguments is that the mid-1990s marks the period in which the culture wars that had emerged in America earlier that decade began to play out in an Australian context. I argue that this transnational flow of the culture wars is itself paradigmatic of globalisation. In Chapter One, I will more fully describe the distinctive and complex transnational flows of information that have characterised globalisation. For the moment, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the terms ‘globalisation’ and ‘culture wars’, and explain how they will be used throughout the thesis.
The term ‘globalisation’ is a famously contested one, as even a cursory glance at the burgeoning field of ‘globalisation studies’ will attest. Most theorists seem to concur that this term refers to a phenomenon in which “people, machinery, money, images now follow increasingly nonisomorphic paths” on a global scale (Appadurai, 1996, p.37). The ‘globalisation’ of Australia could be said to have commenced with the country’s “settlement” (or invasion) by the British in 1788 (Wesley, 2000, p.75). The mid-1990s marked the period in which Australia was globalised in the more contemporary sense of this term. My focus is on the more ‘cultural’ dimensions of globaliation. In Chapter One, I use Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) model of “global cultural flows” to help explain how and why the culture wars of the U.S. gained ascendance in mid-1990s Australia. The model of “global cultural flows” also helps to explain how feminism and feminist debates have been transported within and outside Australia.

To grasp the term ‘culture wars’, it is instructive to first look at the term ‘culture’. McKenzie Wark provides a usefully broad definition in his book *The Virtual Republic* (1997). Wark is the most prolific theorist of the culture wars in Australia during the 1990s; his work spans the fields of literature, politics and the media. I draw on this work frequently throughout the thesis. In *The Virtual Republic*, Wark concurs with British cultural theorist Raymond Williams that ‘culture’ is best understood as a “structure of feeling” (cited in Wark, 1997, p.19). According to Wark, “culture is something you learn, perhaps without really being aware of it, yet it shapes your awareness of everything around you and how you react to things” (Ibid). Within any culture

… there are ethical and political questions at stake as to how open or closed a particular culture is to different behaviours and attitudes, both within the ranks of those it considers ‘inside’ it, and those it considers ‘outside’. The signs and rules (of a culture) set up these notions of an inside and an outside. (Ibid)

The ‘culture wars’ did not suddenly appear in the 1990s, but they certainly gained force during this decade. These ‘wars’ have focused on the question of which individuals or

3 These include works by Appadurai (1996 and 2001); Hardt and Negri (2000); Hawthorne (2002); Hoogvelt (1997); Hooper (2007); Shepard and Hayduk (2002).
groups wield cultural power and which ones do not. The culture wars have been concerned with “ideas of right and wrong – both in society at large and at the personal level” (McKnight, 2005, p.141). These ‘wars’ have also been about trying to maintain a sense of “social cohesion” (Ibid). Maintaining “social cohesion” is particularly important in times of rapid social and political change. The complex transnational flows of information (cultural and otherwise) which have taken place during and since the final decades of the twentieth century, and which I describe in Chapter One, constitute one example – or, more accurately, they constitute a number of examples - of this change. The emergence of ‘second-wave’ feminism during the 1960s helped bring about myriad changes in women’s lives. These changes have been met with fierce opposition from outside and sometimes even from within the feminist movement. These critics have blamed feminism for crimes ranging from the destruction of the nuclear family to the erosion of education standards.

The debates that have constituted the ‘culture wars’ have been around what Elaine Sharp calls “morality issues” (Sharp, 1999, p.4). According to Sharp: “Despite their obvious economic implications, culture war controversies are distinctive because they are rooted in deep-seated moral values” (Ibid, p.3). Some of these controversies have foregrounded sex and gender (Sharp cites abortion and pornography), while others have not. Each of these controversies has been concerned with how “open” or “closed” a particular culture can be to “different behaviours and attitudes” in regards to particular issues. What is an acceptable or humane approach to a particular issue? Which groups or individuals can or should have their opinions regarding a particular issue heard within the public sphere?

According to Lillian S. Robinson, “the university (has been) represented” throughout the course of the culture wars “as being long-since lost to … demonic forces” and “the virgin territory to be protected from invasion by them” (Robinson, 1997, p.180). Robinson refers to accusations by conservative commentators that university curricula have been corrupted by feminism, Marxism, queer theory, postcolonialism. Robinson writes from an American standpoint, but these accusations have also been made in an Australian context. In Chapters Two and Three, I address two texts (The First Stone and

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4 In Chapter One, I critique the ‘waves model of feminism’.
The Lesbian Heresy) which – though written from (apparently quite different) feminist perspectives – suggest that certain strands of academic feminism are gaining a dubious influence on the academy as a whole and on young women in particular. The terms ‘academic feminist’ and ‘academic feminism’ have come (as I will explain in Chapter One) to encompass a single, monolithic group of feminists who are employed as academics.

This thesis is not, however, simply about attacks that have been made against feminists working in academia. Throughout the culture wars, feminism – whether or not it has emerged from the academy\(^5\) – has not only been an object of derision. Nor have feminists have stopped speaking out or writing. In my selected texts, and in the critical responses to these texts, we find a broad range of feminists debating how exactly the relationship between sex and power is played out in a number of what might be considered “morality issues.” These issues are: sexual harassment, heterosexuality (and especially heterosexual sex), pornography, dominance-submission sex (particularly sadomasochism, hereafter referred to as S/M), sexual consent, and the ‘sexual’ nature of violence.

The culture wars have impacted upon every area of cultural production. I will focus on Australian writing. I use the term ‘Australian writing’ because it encompasses fiction and non-fiction works. Compare this with ‘Australian literature’, which is itself a strongly contested term (Huggan, 2007; McCredden, 2007), but which tends to connote fiction texts published in Australia. At no point do I appeal to essentialist notions of ‘Australian writing’ as writing that is ‘authentic’ to Australia and which is unaffected by events in the global community. Such notions do not stand up in the face of research into what Michael Jacklin calls “the internationalising of Australian literature” (Jacklin, 2009, p.1; and see also Brewster, 1995; Dixon, 1999; Gelder and Salzman, 1988 and 2009; Huggan, 2007; McCredden, 2007; Turner, 1986 and 1994). A key argument is that my texts mark the historical moment in which so-called ‘Australian writing’ was being thoroughly reshaped by globalisation, as well as by movements such as feminism.

\(^5\) As I suggest at different points in the thesis, drawing a division between feminists situated ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the academy is deeply problematic.
Feminism, Generational Conflict and the New Right

I will now provide a brief overview of the various feminist ‘perspectives’ that will be described throughout this thesis. I place the term ‘perspectives’ in inverted commas because it can be misleading. My use of this term can create the sense that there are rigidly defined groups of feminists, and that each group has one set of views that are mutually exclusive and homogenous. This is not true, as I will soon point out. The overview provided below will at least give the reader an idea of how the debates which my texts engage with have been framed.

The first set of feminist perspectives is based on the notion that gender is structured as a hierarchy whereby men as a social group exert power over women as a social group. This pervasive system of masculine power has been variously referred to as “male supremacy” and “male domination” (Thompson, 1991a), and is thought be enforced primarily through sex. Heterosexual sex is understood here to be a key site of “male domination/supremacy”, though this system of masculine power may also be reified in acts (for example, lesbian S/M) that do not involve men, but which do involve apparent power imbalances. As the American feminist legal theorist Catharine A. MacKinnon famously argued:

> Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away … Sexuality is the social process through which social relations of gender are created, organized, expressed, and directed, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society.
> (MacKinnon, 1989, p.3)

Arguments such as these are indebted to what is best known as ‘radical feminism’.

6 According to the Australian theorist Denise Thompson, radical feminism arose “out of the practical politics of women’s lives and experiences” (Thompson, 2001, p.3). Radical feminists have not denied that there are other, less obviously gender-related forms of

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6 This strand of feminism has often been referred to as ‘cultural feminism’ (Echols, 1989), though this label has been rejected by some self-identified radical feminists (Lienert, 1996). In respect to these women, I use the term ‘radical feminism.’
oppression (for example, racism). Yet according to radical feminists, even these forms of oppression have emerged from the hierarchical system of “male domination”.

Compare this perspective with those feminist perspectives which view sex as a site of “pleasure and danger” (Vance, 1992). These latter perspectives are often sexually libertarian in nature, and have been variously dubbed ‘sex-positive’, ‘sex radical’ and ‘pro-sex’. Feminists aligned with these perspectives have come from various theoretical and political backgrounds (socialist, psychoanalytic). They have argued that penetrative sex, S/M and pornography can be sources of empowerment as well as disempowerment for women. These feminists have argued that radical feminist models of “male domination” and female sexual subordination reify the outdated gender stereotypes that they aim to eliminate. Also, feminists aligned with so-called ‘pro-sex’ perspectives have argued that the aforementioned models of domination and subordination actually resemble right-wing discourses about women being powerless and requiring protection.

Two of the texts addressed in this thesis, The First Stone and Bad Girls, display hues of sexual libertarianism. Broadly speaking, libertarianism

… is the view that each person has the right to live his (sic) life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others … Libertarians defend each person’s right to life, liberty and property – rights that people possess naturally, before governments are created. In the libertarian view … the only actions that should be forbidden by law are those that involve the initiation of force against those who have not themselves used force – actions like murder, rape, robbery, kidnapping and fraud. (Boaz, 1997, p.2)

Libertarianism is not associated with any one political standpoint; indeed, it has had varying degrees of influence on the political left and right. The influence of libertarianism in Australian culture has been pervasive and distinctive. Witness the ‘sexual revolution’ that swept Australia and other parts of the Western world during the 1960s and 1970s. Elements of libertarianism underscore Garner’s feminist standpoint in The First Stone. Libertarianism was also the key philosophy of the Push movement that flourished in Sydney’s inner-city during the mid-twentieth century. In Chapter Four, I argue that
Catharine Lumby takes the kind of anti-censorship stance that had been taken several decades before by the Push. Lumby’s anti-censorship stance is also influenced by feminist critics of anti-pornography feminism in America and Britain.

Also, some the feminist perspectives described throughout the thesis are influenced by poststructuralist discourses on power. These discourses are best summed up in a famous argument made by the French philosopher Michel Foucault:

… in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all. (Foucault, 1997, p.292)

Power is hence not structured as a hierarchical system whereby one person exerts power and the other person is overpowered or disempowered. The fluid model of power I describe here has been useful to feminists for various reasons. It is instructive to diverge briefly and consider some of these reasons. Firstly, in the 1980s, many feminists saw the need to create a more nuanced model of male-female relations, one that was not characterised by rigid gender stereotypes. In 1987, for example, Teresa de Lauretis argued:

… we need a notion of gender that is not so bound up with sexual difference as to be virtually coterminous with it and such that, on the one hand, gender is assumed to derive unproblematically from sexual difference while, on the other, gender can be subsumed in sexual differences as an effect of language, or as pure imagination – nothing to do with the real. (de Lauretis, 1987, p.2)

This argument arose out of feminist debates about whether different forms of sexual expression (for example, pornography) always reinforce power imbalances between men

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7 I do not suggest that there were no differences between feminists (in Australia or elsewhere) prior to the 1980s. That is not true, as various histories of feminism indicate (see Caine, 1997; Paisley, 2000; Simic, 1999).
and women. This argument also emerged from broader debates about ‘difference’ in the feminist movement (Ahmed, 1998; Yeatman, 1990). During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing sense amongst feminists that trying to relate the experiences of all women back to ‘gender hierarchy’ was ultimately unhelpful. The experiences and politics of women and feminists generally are diverse, in terms of their approach towards sex, as well as in terms of factors such as race, class, and sexual identity. In Australia, for example, Aboriginal women writers have argued that their oppression cannot be explained by discourses about men dominating women (Huggins, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Similar criticisms have been made against Anglo-American feminism by African-American and third-world feminists (hooks, 1981 and 1994; Mohanty et al, 1991).

Returning to my texts, the debates they each engage with have been framed in the most basic terms as conflicts between different strands of feminism. On the one hand, we find a strand of feminism that apparently has dominance on a political and cultural level. This is contrasted with another, quite different strand of feminism that is apparently either losing a political voice or is struggling to be heard at all. Specifically, these kinds of conflicts have often been framed in terms of tension between different feminist generations. This is sometimes (though not always) a conflict between ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ feminists. This suggestion is evident in most of my texts and has also been made by their authors, as well as critics of the texts.

Conversely, I use my texts to demonstrate how different feminist perspectives can overlap or show remarkable similarities to one another. I also demonstrate how certain feminist arguments can overlap with the very phenomenon which is ostensibly most opposed to feminism – the New Right. The term ‘New Right’ has commonly been used “to denote the realignment of different political forces on the right-wing of the political spectrum” in Western countries since at least the late 1960s (Ansell, 1997, pp.29-30). In 1987, political scientist Dennis Altman argued that the influence of the New Right in Australia was becoming evident in the growing “electoral appeal” of “bashing feminism, gays, humanism and small ‘l’ liberals” (Altman, 1988, p.22). This “electoral appeal” became even more obvious in 1996, in the election of the John Howard-led Liberal Party
to federal government (where they remained until 2007) and the views of minor party politician Pauline Hanson.\(^8\)

According to Amy Elizabeth Ansell, there are several “features that mark the New Right as distinct from right wing movements of the past” (Ansell, 1998, p.5). These include:

… its populist and sometimes even revolutionary rhetoric; a hybrid ideological fusion of neoliberalism and social conservatism; avoidance of extremism and the centring of its discourse as part of an aggressive bid for political power; mobilization of new blocs of voters around a broad range of social issues; and success at coalition building and attention to organizational detail. (Ibid)

More broadly, the New Right “operates … at the level of culture, as an ongoing ‘hearts and minds’ campaign to change attitudes to such things as work, business, government, rights, obligations and citizenship” (Davis, 2008, p.81). The New Right has sought “to transform the webs of social relationships and obligations between citizens, government, public institutions and business into market relationships” (Ibid). These ‘market relationships’ come under the rubric of what is variously termed ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘economic rationalism’. According to Melbourne academics Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, “economic rationalists” and “neoliberals” have been “ardent believers in minimising the economic responsibilities of the state by privatising public resources and deregulating financial and labour markets” (Boucher and Sharpe, 2008, p.6).

‘Neoliberalism’ is not another word for the ‘New Right’; there are differences between these two phenomena, even if (as Boucher and Sharpe suggest) they have frequently overlapped. Boucher and Sharpe argue that the impact of neoliberalism has been far-reaching:

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\(^8\) For analyses of the Howard government, see Brett (2005); Cater (2006); Maddox (2005). Hanson was expelled from the Liberal Party in 1996 for her anti-immigration views. She continued to promote these views (plus similarly hostile views about Aborigines) in her minor party ‘One Nation’. For an incisive feminist analysis of Hanson that situates her within the context of contemporary Australian right-wing politics, see Winter (2002).
Contemporary Australians are expected to determine their own ‘life plan’ in the absence of inherited guidelines. We must decide on what we think is right without reference to unquestioned customs, and without the benefit of a traditional or shared way of life that might reduce the growing number of lifestyle choices we each face: not just who to marry, but whether we should; not just one career, but perhaps many; not just employment, but ‘employability’; not just Australian, but also a gen Xer, goth, greenie, metrosexual, and so on. (Ibid, p.195)

Individualism is not unique to neoliberalism or the New Right. In Chapters Two and Four, I describe a sense of individualism that has long characterised certain strains of libertarianism. This includes strands of sexual libertarianism.9

A brief word here about my own standpoint as a male researcher writing a thesis which takes feminism as its central topic. There have been many debates about men’s engagement with feminism (Jardine and Smith, 1987), and it is not my aim to rehearse these debates here. I agree with Renate Klein (1989)10 that feminism is a movement designed by and for women, and that a male willingness to participate in the feminist movement (however well-intentioned) can threaten to turn into a male co-option of this movement. Klein argues that men who are sympathetic to feminist insights should identify as “feminist supporters” (Ibid, p.108). I refer to my own standpoint using the slightly more economical term ‘pro-feminist.’

Research Methodology and Structure of Thesis
My two primary forms of research methodology are textual analysis and cultural analysis. By ‘textual analysis’, I refer to the way I undertake close readings of the texts, with consideration of the different genres they occupy. Broadly speaking, these genres are literary fiction and scholarly non-fiction. The non-fiction texts I address are written from quite different feminist perspectives, but they each share an inability to be self-reflexive or self-critical. In each of these texts, a particular feminist perspective is portrayed as

9 For a thorough analysis of individualism in liberal thought, see McCann (2004).
10 Klein does not suggest, and neither do I, that autonomous organising amongst feminist women will necessarily eliminate differences and disagreements between them.
being the most important one and opposing feminist perspectives are ultimately dismissed as being politically unhelpful. The two fiction texts I address are less polarised in terms of their feminist politics. This is largely due to the parodic, self-conscious nature of their narratives.

My engagement with textual analysis is further evident in the way I draw on critical responses to each of my selected texts. These responses include reviews, essays, and interviews with the authors of the texts. A considerable number of these critical responses were published in ‘scholarly’ publications, for example, refereed journals. Some responses appeared in ‘mainstream’ magazines and newspapers. Many of these responses have been produced by scholars in the fields of feminist and sexuality studies. These scholars have their own political and intellectual investments in the debates which my texts engage with. Consequently, they help frame these debates as much as they help frame the ways in which a particular text is read.

My engagement with ‘cultural analysis’ is evident in the way that I read my texts within the specific context of the culture wars and the broader context of globalisation. I consider how these texts engage with debates about certain issues which foreground the relationship between sex and power. I pay particular attention to these debates as they have taken place within Australia and other countries in the Western world, particularly America, but also parts of Western Europe (namely Britain and France). In doing this, I investigate the similarities and differences in the ways these debates played out in Australia and other cultural contexts, and how these similarities and differences are suggested (or not suggested) in the texts.

In Chapter One, I set the terms for my argument that my texts signpost a particular ‘moment’ in Australian culture. I investigate how exactly Australian feminism and writing became ‘globalised’ in the mid-1990s. What do my texts tell us about how the printed text has functioned as a vehicle for transporting feminism within and outside

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11 This is not to suggest these debates have not had an impact elsewhere. For example, there exists a diverse and growing body of writings about sex, gender and power throughout Asia (see Beyer, 1998; Jackson and Cook, 1999). In this thesis, though, I focus on how debates about sex have circulated within and between Western countries such as Australia.
Australia? How has this transportation been impacted by the forces of globalisation? What can these texts (and their accompanying critical responses) tell us about the way that certain political standpoints have been reified and how they have blurred during the culture wars? Why have the debates my texts engage with been framed either/both in terms of generational conflicts or conflicts between ‘pro’- and ‘anti’-sex feminists?

In Chapter Two, I address *The First Stone*. Many critics rightly criticised the mother-daughter feminist dyad that Garner evokes in this text, but I argue that they also tended to *reproduce* this dyad. I argue that it is more politically and intellectually astute to consider how Garner (following U.S. commentators such as Camille Paglia) uses her own feminist platform to argue that academic feminists are teaching young women to follow a victim-obsessed feminist politics. Garner contrasts this feminism with her libertarian and (she suggests) ‘older’ version of feminism. I argue that, in doing this, Garner utilises various political tactics that have also been used by the New Right. These include attacking the incorporation of feminism into university teaching and research, and conflating various feminist perspectives (in this case, on sexual harassment) into one monolithic and politically undesirable perspective.

In Chapter Three, I address *The Lesbian Heresy*. Sheila Jeffreys writes from the perspective of a self-identified radical lesbian feminist. Yet I argue that she echoes Garner and the New Right when she argues that young feminist students are becoming unhealthily influenced by a new strand of academic feminism. This academic feminism (which Jeffreys sees as exemplified in the work of U.S. philosopher Judith Butler) understands heterosexuality to be voluntaristic and “performative”, rather than as being the bastion of male supremacy. I argue that many of Jeffreys’ critics inadvertently lend support to her argument when they criticise her for “putting the politics back into lesbianism” (Raymond, 1989). Conversely, I contend that *The Lesbian Heresy* provides an opportunity to more carefully interrogate the complex differences and similarities that exist between different feminist approaches to heterosexuality.

In Chapter Four, I address *Bad Girls*. This is the first of three texts that engage with feminist debates about sexually explicit cultural representations. I argue that the political promise of Lumby’s book lies in her call for a feminist perspective on these representations (and here I include ‘pornographic’ representations) that is not framed by
polarised political positions. Lumby also warns against an alliance between anti-pornography feminists and the New Right. However, I contend that Lumby contradicts her own argument by suggesting that her libertarian and provocative feminist readings of certain print advertisements will resonate strongly with media-literate 1990s feminists; and that anti-pornography feminists are outdated and fixated on female victimisation. In doing this, she evokes the polarised and generation-based warfare between ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-’ pornography feminists that took place in America and which she ostensibly opposes.

In Chapters Five and Six, I address Linda Jaivin’s *Eat Me* and Justine Ettler’s *The River Ophelia* respectively. Both are set in inner-city Sydney and both look at the politics of sexually explicit literary representations. In Chapter Five, I focus primarily on the metaphor of eating in Jaivin’s novel. I suggest that eating functions in this text as a metaphor for women’s consumption of sexually explicit women’s writing and also for women’s sexual objectification and ‘consumption’ of men. I suggest that, in advancing this double-edged metaphor, *Eat Me* poses a number of important questions that I will explore throughout the chapter. Is the sexual objectification of men a useful feminist strategy or does it perpetuate gender hierarchy? Is it significant that Jaivin’s depictions of male sexual objectification are framed as women’s *fantasies*? Is there a truly ‘feminist’ way for women to write about sex? Are feminist criticisms of dominance-submission sexuality always old-fashioned, right-wing and pro-censorship?

In Chapter Six, I argue that *The River Ophelia* presents the most complex and potentially inclusive feminist politics of all my texts. Ettler’s novel mobilises a broad range of feminist perspectives on the issues of female masochism and sexual consent. Ettler’s novel is a feminist rewriting of male-authored texts, one that is influenced by the work of writers such as the American Kathy Acker, and which Ettler anticipated (rightly, as it transpired) would have an enthusiastic Australian audience. In *The River Ophelia*, the Marquis de Sade’s ‘Justine’ is portrayed as a masochistic literary studies student. Ettler explores the connections between this character’s desire for “exquisite pain” and a broader cultural fascination with sadism – sadism being defined here as the conflation of sex and violence. Ettler’s character ‘Justine’ also yields various degrees of (sometimes illusory) sexual power over those around her. I argue that my reading of *The River
Ophelia moves away from the novel’s initial reception as an example of ‘grunge’ or ‘dirty realist’ writing. This reception was encouraged (partly, at least) by Ettler, but I argue that it says nothing about the novel’s textual and sexual politics.
In this chapter, I set the terms for my argument that the mid-1990s marks an important cultural moment, especially in the history of Australian feminist writing. This was the moment that the culture wars and globalisation gained ascendance in Australia. I argue that my selected texts are by-products of these two interrelated phenomena. I investigate why my texts and their critics frame certain feminist debates as generational conflicts. I move on to argue that a careful reading of these texts suggests that there is a more complex set of differences and similarities between feminist and New Right perspectives on the way the relationship between sex and power is played out in the issues that my texts explore. Further to this, I argue that my texts provide an important insight into the increasingly globalised nature of ‘Australian feminism’ and ‘Australian writing’ during the mid-1990s.

Framing the Debates: On Generational Conflict

The term ‘framing’ has already appeared on several occasions already, and with good reason. I will investigate how exactly my selected texts and their critics present what are quite complex feminist debates to their readers. Before doing this, though, I ask: what does the term ‘framing the debate’ mean exactly? In the political realm, this term refers to “(t)he presentation of political ideas and principles so as to encourage one interpretation over another” (Feldman, 2007). More broadly, the term ‘framing the debate’ has been used “across a variety of professions and academic disciplines” to suggest “how people communicate with each other, experience the world around them, and solve their problems” (Ibid).

In my selected texts, feminist debates are framed in two distinct ways. In both, these debates are reduced to disputes between rigidly defined ‘groups’. Firstly, feminists are stereotyped according to their views on sex. Put crudely, the feminists who have participated in these debates are classified as being either ‘pro-sex’ or ‘anti-sex’ (and sometimes the very terms ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ are used). Secondly, feminists are
stereotyped according to generations. In *The First Stone*, Garner suggests that ‘older’ feminists hold an empowering and celebratory attitude towards sex, whereas ‘young’ feminists are fixated on sexual victimisation. In the remaining texts and/or the critical responses to these texts, the opposite is seen as being true.

This is not a thesis about generations or age groups. Nevertheless, it is useful to ask where the metaphor of generational conflict comes from exactly. Why was it so prevalent in the 1990s, especially (though not only) within feminism? What purposes does such a metaphor serve? Answering, or at least beginning to answer these questions, will enable us to understand why the feminist debates which my texts engage with – debates which apparently have nothing to do with generations or age groups – have been framed as generational conflicts.

According to Anthea Taylor (2006), the 1990s was “marked by an over-reliance on the generational paradigm as a means of figuring relationships between different cohorts of feminists.” This was true in Australia, as suggested by my texts, as well as by the publication of books such as *Generation F* and *DIY Feminism* (both 1996), a special edition of the journal *Australian Feminist Studies* in October 1997, and a new foreword that accompanied the 1994 republication of Anne Summers’ *Damned Whores and God’s Police*. In America, a sense of conflict between feminist ‘generations’ was evoked in Katie Roiphe’s *The Morning After* (1994) and Rene Denfeld’s *The New Victorians* (1995). I discuss some of these texts in Chapter Two.

The metaphor of generational conflict has not been unique to feminism. In his controversial and oft-cited book *Gangland* (1997), Mark Davis argues that, in Australia during the mid-1990s, social commentators from the so-called “baby boomer” generation (broadly defined as those born during the 1940s and early 1950s) were over-represented in media and political forums. These commentators were “used to being at the centre, used to being listened to” (Davis, 1997, p.x). Some of these commentators have identified as feminists (Davis cites the example of Helen Garner), others have not. According to Davis, the voices of men and women born from around the mid-1960s onwards – the so-called ‘Generation X’ – were often rendered invisible within the public sphere of mid-1990s Australia. Davis also cites “a spate of media stories” which “focused on youth gangs and youth crime” and which “demonised” traditionally youth-focused events such
as rave parties (Ibid, viii). Media narratives such as these portray “Generation Xers” as nihilistic, spoilt and “whiny”. According to Davis, “(y)oung people” seemed to be “caught on the wrong side of an increasing gap between ‘official’ sanctioned culture and renegade culture” (Ibid).

The ‘baby boomer’ and the ‘GenXer’ are themselves stereotypes, or rather, a collection of stereotypes. Perhaps the most prevalent stereotype of the ‘baby boomer’ is that of the generation that abandoned their idealistic political beliefs in favour of material comforts. The ‘baby boomers’ fought against ‘the system’ during the 1960s and 1970s, as suggested by the Vietnam war protests and the peace movement. By the 1990s, however, ‘baby boomers’ were working within the very ‘system’ they once opposed. They now have a monopoly on the employment market, as well as homes in middle-class suburbia. The ‘baby boomers’ are distanced from the experiences of their offspring. ‘Generation Xers’ face a world that is more uncertain on so many levels than the world in which their parents grew up (Hicks, 1996). This feeds into the most popular stereotype of ‘Generation X’ as the generation that is cynical, angst-ridden and wary of falling for the trappings of consumer culture.

The metaphor of generational conflict has also not been unique to mid-1990s Australia. Research from America and Britain has uncovered similar stereotypes of rebellious, angsty youths and all-knowing, disapproving adults. This work includes Dick Hebdige’s now-almost canonical Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), and extends to the more recent work of Henry Giroux (1997 and 2009) in America and Tara Brabazon (2005), an Australian cultural theorist who is currently based in Britain. In 2009, U.S. journalist and editor Robert Samuelson has argued that “Generational tension, and maybe generational war, is an inevitable part of the Age of Obama” (cited in Goodman, 2009).

At the start of the twenty-first century, it appears that the “boomers” are still the despised ‘older’ generation; they still dominate the media and job markets. However, there now seem to be fewer references to ‘Generation X’, at least in the media and popular culture (Ibid). The ‘Gen Xers’ of the 1990s are now entering middle-age and have given way to ‘Generation Y’ (Watson, 2009).

The metaphor of generational conflict can be traced to a number of sources. I refer firstly to the idea that there is “a steady progression … to a set end point:
adulthood” (Wyn and White, 1997, p.95). This idea has been extremely influential in scholarly studies of youth, and is problematic for numerous reasons (ibid). Perhaps most obviously, this idea “draws on the idea that young people make one transition to adulthood, and that adulthood is a clearly defined status – a destination at which one ‘arrives’” (Ibid, p.96). Yet as Brabazon argues, “the life cycle model – of school, stable work, marriage and family – has corroded …” significantly in recent decades (Brabazon, 2005, p.11). This corrosion can be attributed to several factors. These include increasingly unstable employment markets and the fact that (compared with previous decades) young people have been spending longer periods of time in education (Crawford, 2006; France, 2004). Thus a newer, but quite similar, anxiety about young people has taken shape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Catharine Lumby describes this anxiety as one whereby young people “are refusing” or are unable “to grow up, that they have failed to take on the mantle of adulthood and so constitute a generation … trapped in perpetual adolescence” (Lumby, 2001, p.220). Again, it is their ‘parents’ – members of an ‘older’ generation – who know best.

On a specifically political and theoretical level, the concept of generational conflict has been most famously expressed in the German sociologist Karl Mannheim’s argument

… that a new generation appear roughly every thirty years. While his understanding is founded on their emergence within society, culture and politics, he argues that “the sociological phenomenon of generations is ultimately based on the biological rhythm of birth and death.” Political or cultural regenerations, then, imitate the familial generational model with its regeneration around the 30-year point. (cited in Henry, 2004, p.5)

Mannheim’s argument is echoed in what Australian historian Zora Simic (1999) calls “the waves model of feminist history.” Simic uses this term to describe a tendency to categorise feminist activism that has taken place in different historical periods into different “waves”, for example, “first wave feminism” and “second wave feminism.” According to Simic, the ‘waves model’ has arisen from “a sense of each successive era”
of feminists “feeling as though they are starting from scratch” (Ibid). Simic argues that there may have been a sense amongst some feminists that “women’s unequal access to the public sphere has hindered the development of a strong feminist tradition” (Ibid). Simic also suggests that the ‘waves model’ can be traced to an apparent desire felt by some feminists “to disassociate themselves from their foremothers” (Ibid). This is a controversial suggestion, but one which is supported by the publication of books such as The First Stone. In Garner’s text, she suggests that the ‘young’ feminists of the 1990s wanted to “disassociate” themselves from women who became feminists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mannheim argued that new generations are formed “at the thirty year point.” This argument is significant. The 1960s is most often regarded as the decade in which “second-wave feminism” was born (Henry, 2004, p.4). The exact point at which this “second wave” emerged is debatable, although it is commonly designated as the 1963 publication of the American writer Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique. The idea that a new “wave” of feminists emerged in the 1990s “adheres to the 30-year structure” outlined by Mannheim (Ibid).

Framing tensions and differences between certain groups (for example, feminists) as generational conflicts has made for many salacious and attention-grabbing media headlines. This generational conflict framework makes these tensions and differences seem more straightforward and understandable. Within any generational conflict, there are clearly demarcated ‘sides’. Each side has clearly defined ideas of ‘right and wrong’, and these ideas are very clearly differentiated from the ideas held by the other ‘side’. Generational conflicts are ‘black-and-white’; there are no ‘grey’ areas.

Ultimately, though, the metaphor of generational conflict is politically and intellectually unhelpful. The metaphor of generational conflict between feminists has “severely obscure(d) the diversity of feminisms, and their historical fluidity” (Long, 2001). This metaphor assumes that there has been a straightforward progression from one dominant strand of feminism to another. For example, there has been a progression from a sexually libertarian feminism to a feminism which over-emphasises sexual violence and

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12 Simic’s remarks about the “waves model” are made during an overview of Barbara Caine’s book English Feminism, 1780-1980 (1997).
male domination (or vice versa). Jane Long argues that the metaphor of generational conflict works to “homogenise” feminists of different age groups in terms of “their outlooks and activism” (Ibid). This is ironic given the blurring of the “transition” from youth to adulthood that was described earlier.

Many feminists are ignored when feminism is divided into generations. Spongberg et al ask rhetorically: “What about the women who had been engaged in feminist activities prior to the 1970s?” (Spongberg et al, 1997, p.242). These feminists must “go missing” or they must simply not have existed in the first place (Henry, 2004, p.4). Most significantly for my argument, the metaphor of feminist generational conflict is premised on the assumption that feminist approaches to any given issue are determined solely by age, and are unrelated to anything else that has taken place on either a ‘local’ or ‘global’ level. This metaphor says nothing about how feminism has been transported within or between countries. The historian Ann Curthoys points out: “If the world in which we live has changed so fast, so also has the possible meaning of ‘Australian feminism’” (Curthoys, 1994, p.14). ‘Australian feminism has always been, and always be shaped by events that take place within and outside Australia.

Thus, I contend that it is most useful to situate the publication and critical reception of my texts within the broad context of globalisation, and the specific context of the culture wars. My texts investigate how the power imbalance between men and women is reinforced or challenged in the context of a number of issues that have been hotly debated during the culture wars. These debates have been not only concerned with specific issues, though. They are not simply about how the relationship between sex and power is played out in (for instance) S/M or pornography. These debates have essentially been concerned with who ‘owns’ or ‘controls’ feminism. Which feminist voices were genuinely concerned with empowering women and which were concerned with reinforcing the sexist status quo? Which feminist voices were relevant or important for the 1990s? Which feminist voices were even being heard in the 1990s?

The culture wars are striking for a number of reasons. The first of these is the ways that various political (feminist and otherwise) perspectives on certain issues have become sharply polarised at the same time as they have sometimes intersected with or resembled each other. The second is the ways in which the culture wars have played out
in both Australian (‘local’) and international (‘global’) contexts. Looking closely at the transnational flow-on of the culture wars will tell us something important about the transnational flows of information that have characterised globalisation. By taking into account these flows, and also by addressing the complex political differences and alliances that have underscored the culture wars, we can move away from a simplistic image of conflict between different ideological positions. This image of ideological division will not enrich our understanding of my texts or their politics.

The (Sexual) Politics of the ‘Culture Wars’

The issues that have been debated during the course of the culture wars have been varied. In this thesis, I focus on issues that foreground the relationship between sex and power. The 1980s and 1990s saw a new wave of gay/lesbian/queer activism. This activism focused largely on issues such as HIV-AIDS and a homophobia that was given renewed impetus by the rise of the New Right (Altman, 1986; Duggan and Hunter, 1995). I discuss these issues briefly in Chapter Three. There have been well-publicised cultural anxieties about paedophilia (Howitt, 1995). My focus is on specifically feminist debates about sex. In my texts, the academy features as an important site of feminist theorising. The academy frequently came under attack during the culture wars, and so did the influence – or, more accurately, the perceived influence – of feminism in the academy. This was true in America, as Lillian S. Robinson (1997) has argued, and it has also been true in Australia.

The attacks on feminism in the academy that gained force during the 1990s were related to rise of the New Right and the concurrent attacks against a supposed politicisation of higher education. Allan Bloom’s 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* provides an early example of such an attack. In the decade that followed, these attacks continued to be made by U.S. commentators such as Dinesh D’Souza (1991) and Roger Kimball (1990), and Australian commentators such as Michael Barnard (Bennett, 1993, p.437). Kimball sums up their grievances in his argument that “(p)roponents of deconstruction, feminist studies, and other politically motivated challenges to the traditional tenets of humanistic study” have been exerting a powerful influence over their

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13 Niall and Mickler (2006) provide an engaging analysis of neoconservatism in the Australian media.
students (Kimball, 1990, p.xi). These “proponents” have transformed supposedly apolitical disciplines into evidence that Western culture is deeply corrupt. New Right commentators have also blamed movements such as feminism for lowering academic standards in universities and other learning environments (for example, high schools). They attacked – and, since the 1990s, right-wing media columnists and authors have continued to attack - courses in which students are taught that “language constructs reality” (Turner, 1999, p. 9). The academics who teach these courses are “dumbing down” the study of canonical literature by insisting it be read according to what one commentator described as the “contemporary preoccupations” of “race and class” (Lewis and Saluzinsky, 2006).14

The New Right’s use of the term ‘political’ is important. The slogan “the personal is political” has long been used by feminists to suggest how issues relating to women – issues which have historically been regarded as unimportant – are important. In explaining the genesis of this slogan, Susan Hawthorne argues:

… one’s personal behaviour has political content and political intent, that is, it is a matter of will and of decision-making. Many feminists have struggled to unlearn their social conditioning and have developed strategies for supporting their changed behaviour. Attitudinal shift …is a very stable form of power, and one that could be used to change masculine behaviour. For if women are capable of change, so are men. (Hawthorne, 2003b)

Conversely, the New Right commentators cited above seem to “prefer the world to be simple, natural, apolitical” (Ibid). Not all of these commentators have relied on arguments about biological essentialism to justify oppression. Nor would they necessarily want to be seen as justifying oppression or biological determinism at all. However, these commentators do suggest that oppression is not a byproduct of “will and decision-

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14 This quote is attributed to John Howard, who used the term “dumbing down” to describe the impact he saw “postmodernism” as having upon the study of literature in Australian high schools. Kevin Donnelly later used this term in his analysis of a supposed left-wing bias in these schools (Donnelly, 2007). The reference to “contemporary preoccupations” of “race and class” is attributed to Leonie Kramer, formerly a professor of English at Sydney University. Kramer’s opposition to “prescriptive” literary criticism has been well-documented (Docker, 1984, p.166).
making”. No one person or group is “responsible” for negative attitudes towards women (Ibid). Any argument to the contrary is ‘political’ or – to use another notorious term of derision – ‘politically correct’. In the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘politically correct’ was commonly used by activists to describe behaviour that was considered appropriate or conducive to a particular political struggle (Bennett, 1993; Weir, 1995). Since the early 1990s, the terms ‘political’ and ‘politically correct’ have been appropriated by the New Right to describe and also discredit any discourse that challenges (or sets out to challenge) sexism, racism, homophobia, classism.

Moreover, these New Right commentators have suggested that oppression is only a problem for certain individuals, as opposed to entire groups of people. Writing about the ‘stolen generation’ of Aborigines, for example, Andrew Bolt argues: “… I do not deny that some children – and not just Aboriginal – were removed from their families for reasons that weren’t good enough” (Bolt, 2006). This kind of rhetoric belies the strong current of individualism which has been a characteristic feature of neoliberalism. Questions are raised as to why exactly this kind of research is taking place. What kind of broader social or political relevance does this research have? Is it simply a ploy by ‘the left’ to gain a monopoly over the political landscape?

Finally, and related to the above points, the New Right have helped to reinforce a sense of division between the academy and the world ‘outside’ the academy. This becomes evident in the language that New Right commentators have derogatorily applied to research conducted in areas such as feminism. I have mentioned the terms ‘political’ and ‘politically correct’. I refer also to the derogatory use of the terms ‘elite’, ‘theory’ and ‘academic feminist’. Writing from an Australian perspective, political theorist Guy Rundle argues that the “mobilisation of the “elite” tag by a network of well-connected right-wingers was part of the continuing intellectual degradation of conservatism in both Australia and the USA” (Rundle, 2004, p.50). Robinson argues: “Recognizing the silenced voices of the oppressed … is called elitist because it points to a less homogenous and self-congratulatory national narrative … Here, elitism means questioning the

15 Davis recalls that Australian activists once “used to talk about being ‘ideologically sound’, which, being for the most part self-directed, had an irony the accusation of ‘political correctness’ usually lacks” (Davis, 1997, p.47).
decisions of those in power” (Robinson, 1997, pp.179-80). Robinson points to a double standard whereby those who challenge “homogenous and self-congratulatory” cultural narratives are regarded as being distanced from the feelings and experiences of the general public. Members of the general public are portrayed as “ordinary people”, and their “needs” fall upon the deaf ears of the “elites” who “lecture them on political values and cultural etiquette” (McKnight, 2005, p.11).

The terms ‘postmodern and ‘theory’ have at times been closely linked. This link has not been made only by the New Right. Since at least the 1980s, the term ‘theory’ has frequently been used to describe the incorporation of poststructuralist discourses from countries such as France into ‘traditional’ academic disciplines and fields of inquiry (Morris, 1998, pp. 1-28). Robert Dixon makes this point in his essay ‘Deregulating the Critical Economy: Theory and Australian Literary Criticism in the 1980s’ (1999). Dixon’s specific focus is literary criticism, or what he terms “Aust. Lit. crit.” (Dixon, 1999, p.199).

... when theory did arrive (in Australia) it fragmented the profession, and this was immediately reflected in a rhetorical uncertainty about the readership for literary criticism, a loss of certainty about a coherent public sphere for Aust. Lit.Crit. Critics and reviewers using theory could not be confident that their readers spoke the same language. (Ibid)

Dixon frames the arrival of ‘theory’/poststructuralism in Australian literary studies in terms of a “generational change” (Ibid, p.194). He dates this “generational change” to the early 1980s (Ibid, p.199).

Dixon further argues that attacks against “theory’s impact on Aust. Lit. crit in the 1980s” came at the same time that neoliberalism began to impact on Australia (Ibid, p.201). This is no coincidence, he suggests, and I agree (Ibid). For some critics, the term ‘theory’ has been used to suggest the way in which academia has become disconnected from the ‘real world’. According to this perspective, academics who engage with feminist theory are automatically ‘postmodernists’. These academics espouse elitist rhetoric that is only comprehensible – and vaguely relevant – to other academics (Duggan, 1998). One
example is the common misreading of the French theorist Roland Barthes’ essay ‘Death of the Author’ (1967). This essay is the best-known early example of the union between literary theory and what became known as ‘poststructuralism’ (Barthes, 1977; Burke, 1994). The literary/cultural theorist Graeme Turner points to this misreading in his essay ‘Australian Literature and the Public Sphere’ (1999). Turner’s essay appears in the same volume as Dixon’s piece on “Aust. Lit. crit.”

Certain phrases, decontextualised and excerpted from the theoretical history of a discipline positively reinventing itself, hit the wall and stuck there, accruing new and often implausible meanings. ‘The death of the author’ came to mean that authors did not write books … (Turner, 1999, p.9)

Another example can be found in the conservative columnist Luke Slattery’s article ‘I Think Therefore I Think’, which was published in a May 1993 edition of The Australian. This newspaper is known for its right-wing bias (Beecher, 2009, xvi). In his article, Slattery criticises “the rise of doctrinaire theory” in Australian humanities” which he attributes to “an uncanny alliance of post-structuralists, feminists and post-Marxists” (cited in Bennett, 1993, p.438).

‘Academic feminist’ is a blanket term that has been applied to feminists employed in the academy. Critics of academic feminism have suggested that academic feminists share the same aim: to transform all areas of scholarly inquiry into evidence of an insidious and pervasive patriarchy. Academic feminists are seen as working in collaboration with victim-focused postcolonialists, queer theorists, Marxists and environmental activists. According to this perspective, academic feminists are out of touch with women who do not see themselves as being oppressed. Academic feminists are also distanced from feminists whose activism takes place outside the university. Yet, because of their scholarly credentials, academic feminists are the most widely heard in scholarly circles and the media. Their voices are understood (at least by their students and peers) to be the most credible.

As used in the examples cited above, the terms ‘elites’, ‘political’, ‘politically correct’, ‘theory’ and ‘academic feminist’ are homogenising. New Right commentators
have conflated a broad range of political movements and approaches under these overarching labels. Most academic feminists would see themselves as “questioning the decisions of those in power”. These academic feminists have certainly been asking who wields power and who does not. Nevertheless, and perhaps stating the obvious, there are as many differences between ‘progressive’ or ‘left-wing’ political theorists and ways of knowing as there are similarities. Also, and I will return to this point throughout the thesis, not all feminists agree with one another.

A defensive backlash mentality lies at the heart of this hostility towards the perceived influence of ‘progressive politics’ on the university. In a feminist context, this backlash mentality has been most famously analysed by Susan Faludi. Faludi’s ‘backlash’ thesis will be referenced on several occasions in the pages that follow. In Chapter Two, I argue that Garner is one feminist who effectively contributes to this ‘backlash’. In Chapter Three, Jeffreys frames The Lesbian Heresy (in part) as a lesbian-centric variation on Faludi’s book; that is, Jeffreys purports to investigate a backlash against radical lesbian feminism. This, she suggests, is parallel to the broader backlash that against feminism that Faludi describes. In Chapter Four, Lumby accuses Faludi of simplistically blaming the media for promoting a global anti-woman conspiracy.

According to Faludi, backlashes against feminism have occurred throughout history, and that they have been triggered by a belief that “women are making great strides” in different areas of society (Faludi, 1990, p.xix). The backlash that she analyses began to unfold in America during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and gained currency in Australia during the 1980s (Rowland, 1984). This was not coincidentally the very period in which the New Right emerged as a global political phenomenon. According to Faludi, this backlash became visible in the “anti-feminist” stance of New Right political groups, as well as in a broad range of government policies, popular psychology books and popular culture texts (Faludi, 1990, pp. ix-xxii). Faludi argues that the most recent backlash against feminism has been premised on the belief that “(w)omen are enslaved by their own liberation” (Ibid, p.x). Here, feminism is not seen as being the key to women’s emancipation, but rather as helping to perpetuate their oppression. Feminists have been charged with “all the crimes” that they have supposedly aimed to eliminate (Ibid, p.xxii).
New Right attacks against academic feminists also suggest changes in the social and political status of education – particularly higher education - under neoliberalism. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, higher education has become increasingly “subject to the rules of the market” (Giroux, 2009, p.31). Education is now treated more and more as a commodity, and students have become treated as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’. New Right commentators have argued that the incorporation of feminism (and other ‘progressive’ ways of knowing) within university teaching and research is dangerous. This is because such research is unbeneﬁcial for the economy.16 In Australia, right-wing media columnists have criticised the use of taxpayers’ money to fund research and courses on sex and gender-related issues. These courses are (according to the New Right mindset I have been describing) more intent on politically influencing students than with educating them (Bennett, 1993, p.437; Bolt, 2001 and 2006).17

The anti-intellectualism that is suggested in the work of these columnists was not exclusive to the 1990s or to the political right. In 1989, for example, the author Patrick White described “the great Australian emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions” (cited in Schreuder, 2006, p.17). There is some basis to the anxiety that academics are elitist and disconnected from the ‘general public’. Academics undertake extensive research as part of their job descriptions and are frequently called upon by the media to act as ‘experts’ on particular issues. The university itself has always been an elitist institution in many regards, and this sense of elitism has only increased in recent decades. In Australia, for example, the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) during the late 1980s and a concurrent escalation in living costs have made university attendance more unattainable for many working-class men and women (Wright, 2005).18 Commentators such as Michael Barnard and Andrew Bolt have

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16 This is not to suggest that feminism is beyond cooption by the market. The advent of feminist publishing is just one example of how marketable feminism has become, even if feminist publishers have not been motivated only by making a profit.

17 Bolt cites the funding provided by the Australian Research Council (ARC) to academic researchers. In 2005, Brendan Nelson (then Federal Education minister) controversially denied a series of ARC grants without offering sufficient explanation why (Alexander, 2007). There was speculation that these grants were denied on political grounds (Ibid).

18 Under HECS, students accrue a debt for their studies. Money towards this debt is deducted from students’ wages once they reach a certain income threshold.
identified and exploited some already negative public perceptions about universities and academics.

**Beyond ‘Right’, ‘Left’ and ‘Conservative’**

Thus far, I have sketched a fairly standard image of ideological conflict between ‘progressive’ academics and their New Right opponents. This conflict is real in many regards, but to suggest that this is what the culture wars have been ‘about’ – or my texts are ‘about’ – is too simplistic. The contemporary political landscape in Australia is infinitely more complex than the picture of ideological unrest that I have described. Portraying the culture wars, or my selected texts, as battles between ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’, or between those situated ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the academy reproduces the kind of binaries that I want to move beyond.

In Australia and elsewhere, there have always been different strands of feminism, and sometimes there have been tensions between these different strands. In the Introduction, I described criticisms made by Aboriginal women that much feminist scholarship has been Anglocentric. Meaghan Morris describes the polarised feminist responses to the work of Mary Daly, an American radical feminist who delivered a public lecture in Sydney in 1981 (Morris, 1988, pp. 27-50). Daly drew from mythology and theology to argue that male supremacy has been a transhistorical and transnational phenomenon. Susan Sheridan cites Australian feminist debates about poststructuralism (Sheridan, 1994, p.152). These debates had their origins in the U.S. and were imported to Australia during the 1980s through “graduate students and ‘feral’ publications like *Working Papers* and the feminist journals …” (Ibid).

My selected texts have been written from a range of feminist standpoints, as have the various critical responses to these texts. I use these texts to demonstrate how quite diverse feminist perspectives on certain issues at times converge or resemble one another. In Chapters Two and Three, I argue that Garner and Jeffreys – while politically different in many ways – share a similarly dismissive approach towards academic feminism. The individualism that Garner displays throughout *The First Stone* is also evident in *Bad Girls*, even if Lumby claims to advocate diversity in feminist thought. In *The River Ophelia*, Justine Ettler mobilises radical feminist, poststructuralist, and libertarian
perspectives on the issues of sexual consent and female masochism. Of all the texts I address, I argue that the politics of The River Ophelia most defy easy categorisation. In this novel, there is not a sense of feminist perspectives being played off against each other. This is even despite Ettler’s suggestion that her text was somehow representative of young women’s (and, more broadly, young people’s) voices and lived experiences in the 1990s. This suggestion was also made in some of the critical responses to Ettler’s novel.

Finally, I use my texts to demonstrate how blurred the line has sometimes become between the New Right and movements such as feminism. David McKnight discusses this issue at length in his study of the culture wars in Australia. McKnight’s key terms are ‘right’ and ‘left’. For much of the twentieth century, “the Left and Right came to be defined more by those supporting a greater role for government – in either its social democratic or Marxist forms – and those who opposed such a role. (McKnight, 2005, p.4) Yet by the 1990s, “the established spectrum of Right and Left” had become “inadequate” (Ibid, p.3). There are now many overlaps between political perspectives on many issues. As McKnight argues: “We often feel frustrated that policies and ideas are put into one box or the other, rather than being judged in their own terms. In fact, today, there are many ‘Lefts’ and many ‘Rights’, which is a sign that the Right-Left spectrum is breaking up” (Ibid, p.2).

Other words used to describe traditional political standpoints can be similarly misleading. These include the term ‘conservative’. According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens: “To be conservative is … to want to conserve. Yet in current circumstances it is not only, or even mainly, those who term themselves conservatives who wish to do so” (Giddens, 1994, p.23)\(^\text{19}\). The New Right might wish to conserve ‘traditional’ values, but it has also transformed the political landscape in a manner that can only be described as radical (Boucher and Sharpe, 2008, p.xii). In Australia, this was demonstrated by the policies and political rhetoric of John Howard and his government. As Boucher and Sharpe argue, under Howard the “emphasis was on rapid change,

\(^{19}\) The blurring of traditional political standpoints is invoked in the very titles of the texts by McKnight and Giddens. These titles are almost identical. McKnight’s text is entitled Beyond Right and Left, while Giddens’ text (published eleven years earlier) is entitled Beyond Left and Right.
bringing down many of the institutions that had shaped Australia …” (Ibid, p.x). Witness too the rightward shift of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which traditionally focused on working-class concerns and which has historically maintained strong ties with the trade union movement (Thompson, 1999). This rightward shift has arguably been taking place since Bob Hawke’s ALP government in the 1980s. This government introduced major economic reforms that were “modified” but certainly not eradicated by the Howard government (McKnight, 2005, p.4). The ALP have been accused of trying to appease middle-class voters and the business sector (Ibid).

In *The First Stone* and *The Lesbian Heresy*, Garner and Jeffreys echo the New Right commentators cited earlier when they attack ‘young’ feminists who have apparently gained positions of authority in universities and who are threatening to disempower young female students with politically and intellectually dubious discourses. Garner and Jeffreys attempt to ‘conserve’ ‘older’ styles of feminism, but ultimately sound like ‘conservatives’ in the best-known sense of that word. Jeffreys’ hostility towards academic feminism is particularly ironic, given that she is herself an academic feminist. Both *The First Stone* and *Bad Girls* are more concerned with what their authors (Garner and Lumby) find politically desirable, not what is politically desirable for women as a social group. As suggested, individualism has been a distinguishing feature of libertarianism and the New Right.

**Australia and Globalisation**

The culture wars arose in Australia as part of the broader phenomenon known as ‘globalisation’. This fact raises a series of important questions that I aim to answer, or go some way towards answering, throughout the thesis. What do my texts say about the different ways that the culture wars have played out in Australia and other Western countries, namely America and Britain? Do the texts explore the myriad cultural and political differences between these countries? What does the publication of my chosen texts say about how the printed text has been used to transport feminist debates within

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20 However, these ties (past and present) are still used by conservatives in the twenty-first century to portray the Labor Party as union-biased and thus a danger to the Australian economy (see Kerin, 2007). This is even despite the fact that the current Prime Minister of Australia, the ALP’s Kevin Rudd, has promoted himself as an “economic conservative” (cited in Hartcher, 2009).
and outside of Australia? How has globalisation shaped this textual transportation of feminism?

By the mid-1980s, the impact of globalisation upon Australian society was becoming increasingly evident. The 1983 floating of the Australian dollar by the Hawke government is the most famous early example of globalisation in its economic form in Australia. The economist Saul Eslake has argued that, by floating the dollar, the government “contributed to the internationalisation of the Australian economy” (Eslake, 2003). For example, there was “a significant increase in Australian investment overseas as well as foreign investment in Australia” (Ibid). In this thesis, I focus more on what is sometimes referred to as ‘cultural globalisation’. Cultural globalisation encompasses, but is not restricted to, economics: it also encompasses the globalisation of popular culture, literature, political movements and political trends. As Paul Hooper argues, “culture is arguably the most direct way in which we experience globalization” (Hooper, 2007, p.2). Equally, “globalizing processes do not stand outside of culture or cultures, but are shaped by them, amongst other influences” (Ibid). As mentioned in the previous chapter, I focus on cultural globalisation as it has impacted Western countries such as Australia.

Cultural globalisation has been accelerated by advances in technology. By the 1990s, events that took place in America or Britain could be transported into Australian households “at breakneck speed” (McChesney, 2003, p.28). Television and radio were responsible for this rapid dissemination of information, as was the internet, which became commonplace in Australian households during this decade (Goggin, 2004). In 1994, McKenzie Wark argued that Australians were living inside “the terrain created by the television, the telephone, the telecommunications networks crisscrossing the globe. These ‘vectors’ produce in us a new kind of experience, the experience of telesthesia – perception at a distance” (Wark, 1994, vii). Wark borrows the term ‘vectors’ from the French theorist Paul Virilio and uses it describe “any trajectory along which bodies, information or warheads can potentially pass” (Wark, 2006, p.99). In 1999, Lumby argued: “The mass media has now become the central disseminator of public information and often acts as a forum and filter for the expression of public opinion” (Lumby, 1999, p.14).
Perhaps the main distinguishing feature of cultural globalisation is what Arjun Appadurai has dubbed “global cultural flows”. In his book *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai provides a comprehensive model of how these flows have operated. Appadurai concedes that in “(a)ll periods in human history, there have been some disjunctures in the flows” of cultural phenomena such as writing (Appadurai, 1996, p.37). He argues, though, that “the sheer speed, scale, and volume of each of these flows” have become “so great that the disjunctures have become central to the politics of global culture” (Ibid). Appadurai identifies “five dimensions of global cultural flows that can be termed (a) ethnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) financescapes, and (e) ideoscapes” (Ibid, p.33; his emphasis). He argues: “The suffix –scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterise international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles” (Ibid).

At no point does Appadurai suggest that these “global cultural flows” are always beneficial to the wider population. He cites the example of “media flows across national boundaries that produce images of well-being that cannot be satisfied by national standards” (Appadurai, 2001, p.6). Nor does Appadurai deny the existence of American imperialism. As Dennis Altman observed in 2006, we still “live in a world dominated by the American imaginary” (Altman, 2006, p.1). Appadurai’s contention is that U.S. forces (political, economic and otherwise) are not the sole determinants of global culture. That kind of argument grants too much power to U.S. culture, and also tends to perpetuate certain stereotypes and myths about this culture. Philip and Roger Bell make this point in their study of the supposed ‘Americanisation’ of Australia when they argue: “The blanket term ‘Americanisation’ is frequently no more than an assumption concerning the origins of a cultural example (language, dress, food) which may or may not be accurate” (Bell and Bell, 1998, p.5).

I contend that Appadurai’s model of “global cultural flows” is useful when trying to understand how exactly different ways of knowing, as well as different political movements, flow into and out of countries; and how (in doing this) they are shaped and reshaped by the specific conditions (political, economic, cultural) of the countries they pass through. Appadurai helps us to see globalisation, and particularly cultural globalisation, as “a series of processes in which the global and the local meet, interact,
and result in ‘productive tensions’ leading to the creation of hybrid forms” (Mills, 2009, p.36). This moves us away from understanding globalisation to be “the imposition and perpetuation of sameness and the destruction of diversity” (Ibid, p.32). Appadurai also moves away from the equally simplistic view that there is “a uniquely Australian cultural and political identity and consensus which US-originated culture threatens” (Bell and Bell, 1998, p.5). Australia has always been a ‘globalised’ nation, as I have pointed out. Appadurai’s model of “global cultural flows” enables us comprehend how Australia has been impacted by this most recent, and most far-reaching, wave of globalisation.

That the culture wars which began in earnest in an American context had their own incarnation in Australia is one example of “global cultural flows” at work. There are similarities in the way the culture wars have played out in both countries. In Australia and America, issues pertaining to sex and sexuality have been the topics of public debate amongst commentators from a range of political standpoints. The debates about American national history that Robinson (1997, pp.178-80) addresses have a parallel in Australian debates about Native Title, Aboriginal rights and the racial politics of Australian history. These debates have been explored in a range of Australian texts published during the 1990s and early twenty-first century (Behrendt, 1995 and 2004; MacIntyre and Clarke, 2003; Manne, 2003; Markus, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997; Strelein, 2006; Windschuttle, 2002). These texts were published concurrently to major events that included Paul Keating’s 1992 speech about Aboriginal rights and the Mabo court case that same year. However, McKnight argues that “the politics of the culture war at the national level” in Australia “came later at the national level and was articulated differently” (McKnight, 2005, p.146). He argues that despite the existence of “conservative Australian Christians”, Australia has not had “the equivalent to the powerful Christian

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21 For an example of this argument, see Hawthorne (2002).
22 Paul Keating’s speech is often referred to as his ‘Redfern speech’, given that it was delivered in Redfern, an inner-city Sydney suburb with a high Aboriginal population (see Keating, 1992). The ‘Mabo case’ was named after Eddie Mabo, an Aboriginal rights activist who challenged the long-held notion that Australia was ‘terra nullius’ (unoccupied) prior to the arrival of the British in 1788. Terra Nulius was overturned in the High Court of Australia in June 1992, several months after Mabo’s death. For an overview of Aboriginal land rights since 1992, see Strelein (2006).
Coalition (in the U.S.) to drive an agenda on abortion, religious instructions at schools and opposition to sex education and to gay marriage” (Ibid). There have been differences between Australia and the U.S. in the actual scope of the public responses to the issues that my texts address. For example, as I argue in Chapter Four, pornography was very publicly debated by a diverse range of feminists, politicians, media commentators and activists in America and (albeit to a somewhat lesser extent) Britain. This issue has been debated on a comparatively low-key level in Australia, yet Lumby evokes the shrill and polarised nature of the U.S. debates about pornography within an Australian context.

Significantly, there is the strong suggestion in each of my selected texts that a transnational exchange of intellectual and political information is being made, even if the authors do not always explicitly acknowledge this. In each text, Australia’s national borders – figural and physical - are blurred to varying extents, and in quite different ways. In *The River Ophelia*, for example, there are frequent references to French authors, theories and artifacts. The novel is set in inner-city Sydney, but Ettler does not mention the name ‘Sydney’, suggesting she could in fact be describing any city in Australia or (more generally) the West. In *The Lesbian Heresy*, Jeffreys draws examples from Britain, America and Australia to support her argument about the impact of poststructuralist feminism on radical lesbian feminism. According to Jeffreys, radical lesbian feminism is weakening on a global scale, and poststructuralist feminists are to blame.

This textual blurring of national boundaries is easy to read as either proof that the contemporary world has become “a global village” or, conversely, as evidence that globalisation is another word for “cultural homogenization” (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 29 and 11). These kinds of readings are based on the problematic assumption that ‘Australian writing’ and ‘Australian feminism’ are passive entities – entities which have been, and will continue to be effortlessly manipulated by global trends. In the next section, I will investigate how ‘Australian feminism’ and ‘Australian writing’ – and particularly ‘Australian feminist’ texts – have been reshaped by and have also contributed to the “global cultural flows” that I have been describing. I will do so with specific reference to my selected texts.

Also, I will make specific reference to the field of publishing. The interventions that have been made by Australian feminists in this field have been many and varied.
Constraints of space prevent me from listing all these interventions here. I will emphasise the particularly important role the written text has played in enabling Australian feminists to share and critically engage with the insights of feminists around the world. Furthermore, I will briefly describe how globalisation has helped to transform the Australian publishing industry. Prior to the 1980s, the dominant perception of Australia in international publishing circles was that of a remote destination which received imported books but which rarely exported books. Australian writing was frequently perceived in overseas markets as being ‘exotic’ and ‘other’. This situation was changing in the 1990s, when Australian publishers were beginning to play a more active role in distributing their books overseas. 23

**Australian Writing and the “Global Cultural Flows” of Feminism**

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increased publication of authors from marginalised cultural groups. These include Aborigines, migrants, the working class, gays and lesbians, as well as women and feminists (Gelder and Salzman, 1988 and 2009). The 1980s and 1990s saw a flourish in collections of Australian women’s literary fiction (Couani and Gunew, 1988; Gunew and Mayhuddin, 1988; Hawthorne and Pausacker, 1989; Sybylla Feminist Press, 1992), as well as volumes of feminist literary theory (Ferrier, 1992; Gilbert, 1988; Walker, 1983). These paralleled volumes of feminist literary theory that were published in America and Western Europe during this period (see Gallop, 1992; Moi, 1985). There were also a growing number of prolific Australian feminist theorists whose research focused on writing. These theorists included Sneja Gunew (formerly of Melbourne’s Deakin University, now based at the University of British Columbia) and Queensland University’s Carole Ferrier (Sheridan, 1994, p.149).

The publication of feminist books is not *in itself* ‘liberating’ or ‘politically progressive’. As John Hutnyk (2001) and Susan Hawthorne (1989) have warned, the cultural production of groups such as women, gays and lesbians has often been marketed on the perceived ‘otherness’ and ‘exoticism’ of these groups. The mid-1990s publication

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23 For an overview of trends in contemporary Australian publishing, see the essays in Carter and Galligan (2007). Useful analyses of feminist publishing can be found in Brown (2007); Murray (2004); Poland (2003).
of fraudulent authors such as Helen Demidenko/Darville, Marlo Morgan and Leon Carmen/Wanda Koolmatrie is evidence of this. In their recent study of contemporary Australian literary fiction, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman suggest that Australian writing as a whole has sometimes been perceived as exotic. They illustrate this point through a certain reading of Peter Carey’s fiction. According to this reading, the Australia-born, New York-based Carey “might spin his narratives in a space ‘in between’ a rewriting of Australian history through postmodern fictional techniques, a provincial representation of Australian places and identities, and an exoticising of the local for an overseas readership” (Gelder and Salzman, 2009, p.122).

I agree with these arguments about Australian writing and the marketing of ‘otherness’ and ‘exoticism’. Yet, I also argue that the publication of feminist writers has been enormously beneficial to feminism as a whole in Australia. This argument has already been made by a number of scholars. For example, in 2007, Diane Brown pointed out that “a distinguishing feature” of the feminist movement is that it has been “a writer’s movement” (Brown, 2007, p.269). Prior to this, in 1994, Susan Hawthorne argued: “There are women’s stories, old ones and new ones … Storytelling involves engagement, responsiveness between teller and listener; it presupposes community …” (Hawthorne, 1996, p.494). Hawthorne did not mention Benedict Anderson, but she certainly echoes his theory of the role that writing has played in the construction of community. Anderson argued that “the development of print as commodity” in sixteenth century Europe enabled citizens who may have “found it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper” (Anderson, 1983, pp. 41 and 47). The idea that feminist texts have helped construct a sense of ‘community’ amongst feminists will be explored at greater length in Chapter Five.

24 All three authors published novels in 1994 that turned out to be controversial. Helen Darville (an Australian woman of British descent) posed as the Ukrainian-Australian ‘Helen Demidenko’ to publish *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, an ostensibly autobiographical text which some critics saw as attempting to justify the Ukrainian participation in Nazi atrocities (see Manne, 1996). The white male Carmen wrote the ostensibly autobiographical *My Own Sweet Time* under the pseudonym/literary persona of an Aboriginal woman named ‘Wanda Koolmatrie’ (Hosking, 1997). Morgan was an Anglo-American author whose book *Mutant Message Down Under* was supposedly a thinly-veiled account of her life with an Aboriginal tribe. Morgan’s novel was, however, revealed to be a white supremacist fantasy (Ellis, 2004).
The publication and critical reception of feminist texts by Australian writers did not begin during the 1980s. In 1970, for instance, Germaine Greer (an Australian expatriate living in Britain) became famous internationally when she published *The Female Eunuch*. Until the mid-1980s, though, it seems that Australia was more the receptacle to than an active contributor of feminist texts and ways of knowing. Curthoys argues that the “inspiration” for establishing a feminist movement in Australia “came from the U.S.” (Curthoys, 1994, p.16). According to Curthoys, this is part of a broader cultural trend in which “Australian intellectuals and political thinkers have long looked to Britain, America, France, and Germany for ideas” (Ibid, p.19). As she argues: “Information about a new and growing movement called ‘Women’s Liberation’ came to Australia at the end of the 1960s, at first through overseas journals, then from Americans migrating to Australia, and Australians returning from visits to the U.S.” (Ibid, p.16). Between 1970 and 1985, “the pattern was very much one of Australian feminists reading overseas debates, especially American, French, and British …” (Ibid, p.19). Australian feminists were “discussing … ‘overseas theory’ in the light of immediate Australian political concerns and particular Australian intellectual traditions” (Ibid).

There are many reasons for this “one way intellectual traffic” (Ibid). The first of these is the so-called ‘cultural cringe’. This refers to the idea that Australia is unsophisticated and under-developed (intellectually, politically) when compared with other Western countries such as America, Britain or France. The term ‘cultural cringe’ was coined in a 1950 essay by the Melbourne writer A.A. Phillips. Phillips argued that it was “dismaying … that, in any nation, there should be an assumption that the domestic cultural product will be worse than the imported article” (Phillips, 2006, p.2). In *The River Ophelia*, Justine Ettler suggests that the ‘cultural cringe’ had lost popularity by the mid-1990s, although it had not completely disappeared.

Also, Curthoys cites Meaghan Morris’ argument that “Americans and Europeans often assume that we are abstracted, like a footnote from their history” (cited in Curthoys, 1994, p.19). Curthoys develops this point when she argues:

While British and American books and journals were frequently distributed throughout the Anglophone world, publications emanating from Australia, New
Zealand, Canada and South Africa are rarely distributed outside their country of origin. Feminists writing in these countries know little about each other, and know too that their own work remains unknown anywhere else. (Ibid)

“The tyranny of distance”, to use historian Geoffrey Blainey’s (1966) famous phrase, has played a role here. Many Australian writers (feminist and otherwise) have felt the impact of this “tyranny”. According to Jenny Lee (2004), Australia was for decades perceived as a “sleepy backwater” by overseas publishers. This perception can be attributed largely to Australia’s geographical “remoteness from Britain, Europe and the US” (Ibid). As Lee points out, until at least the late twentieth century, “books that originated in Australia tended to stay there” (Ibid).

In the late twentieth century, the status of Australian writing changed dramatically on both a ‘local’ and ‘global’ level. This is related firstly to broad changes in the Australian publishing industry. The establishment of the Australia Council’s Literature Board during the 1970s by the federal government of the time was one of several factors that helped “increase … the volume and quality of work produced (in Australia), and a heightened interested in publishing Australian material” (Galligan, 2007, p.39). By the 1980s, sales of Australian titles had increased dramatically within Australia (Ibid, pp.41-2). The Australian book market went on to experience “constant expansion … through the 1990s” and this “precipitated an unprecedented level of investment in Australian authors” (Ibid, p.45). By the start of twenty-first century, Australia had produced a small number of “global celebrity writers” (Nile, cited in Huggan, 2007, p.7). These include Peter Carey (Rabalais, 2008), as well as David Malouf and Thomas Keneally (Gelder and Salzman, 2009, p.4). In 2009, Gelder and Salzman have acknowledged their “sense” that writing by Australian authors has become “increasingly visible overseas” (Ibid, p.4).

Other factors have played a role in making Australia “increasingly visible overseas”. These factors include technology, which I discussed earlier. Literary studies academic Bruce Bennett cites “(t)he increased prevalence of television since the 1950s, jet air travel since the 1970s, and the internet and cellphone technologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century” (Bennett, 2006, p.2). These have all helped reduce the “tyranny of distance” stigma. As Bennett aptly puts it: “… the vast Australian
landmass has not changed, nor has the distance of our cities from others in the world” (Ibid).

None of this is to suggest that either Australian publishing or writing have been experiencing an unproblematic golden era since the beginning of the 1990s. Graham Huggan acknowledges that “(t)he demands of the contemporary global market”, have not always been helpful to Australian writing (Huggan, 2007, p.7). There are many expectations placed on Australian writing by publishers and readers, amongst them the expectation that it “should be identifiably Australian” (Ibid). This sort of expectation is based on essentialist, as well as Anglocentric and androcentric myths about Australian national identity. These myths are best encapsulated in the one-time slogan for the now-defunct magazine *The Bulletin*: “Australia for The White Man” (Lake, 2005). These myths have persisted even in spite of the political and cultural diversity of writing that has been published in Australia, especially since the 1970s.

Also, by the 1990s, the “Australian publishing industry had become a significant site of struggle as multinational publishers competed for market share” with independent Australian publishers” (Galligan, 2007, p.45). Laurie Muller points out that by the start of this decade the Australian book market was still very much “a book expert destination” (Laurie Muller, cited in Ibid, p. 44). Nevertheless, there was evidence that Australian writing was no longer consigned to a “sleepy backwater”. Australia itself was not as widely seen within the global publishing industry as such a “backwater”. Books that were published in Australia were not always destined to remain in Australia.

Curthoys acknowledges that “(s)ince the mid-1980s”, the “writing of Australian feminist theorists has begun to percolate through to European and North American audiences” (Curthoys, 1994, p.19). Curthoys specifically cites the work of authors such as Meaghan Morris and Elizabeth Grosz. This work has reached international audiences partly through its publication by multinational companies such as Routledge (Ibid, p.22;

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25 For an amusing and idiosyncratic perspective on iconic Australian figures such as ‘the digger’, see Nicoll (2001).
The ‘transnational’ nature of the work published by theorists such as Grosz and Morris is particularly significant when understanding the impact of globalisation on publishing more generally, and specifically on Australian feminist writing. Grosz and Morris were amongst the first Australian feminists to engage with what was (in the 1980s) commonly regarded in Australian scholarly circles to be “import rhetoric” (Morris and Freadman, 1981). This “rhetoric” emerges from such fields as semiotics, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism.

Morris’ work has been notable in that she has explored the complexities of applying poststructuralist discourses from France (particularly Foucault’s work) to analyses of feminism and Australian culture (Ibid; Lewis, 2005; Morris, 1988, 1992 and 1998). In the foreword to her 1992 collection Ecstasy and Economics, Morris announces that the essays contained therein “were written with non-Australian readers in mind” (Morris, 1992, p.8). The papers that formed the basis of these essays were presented to U.S. academic audiences, and they drew on the work of cultural theorists from various countries. Yet she suggests that these “non-Australian readers” may have found the essays to contain what she describes as an “‘alien’ mode of address” (Ibid). Her analyses focus on the Australian poet John Forbes and Paul Keating.

Additionally, during the 1980s and 1990s, feminists gained inroads in Australian publishing. The Melbourne-based Sybylla Feminist Press is one example of this. Sybylla was first established in the mid-1970s and went on to publish a host of Australian feminist titles (Brown and Lynch, 2003). In 1991, Spinifex Press commenced operation. According to Diane Brown, the Melbourne-based Spinifex have “identified their marketing niche as publishing a balance of Australian and international feminist authors from a radical feminist perspective across a range of writing styles” (Brown, 2007, p.273). Spinifex has distributed their books within and outside Australia, and in 1994, hosted the International Feminist Bookfair. According to Brown, this Bookfair was

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26 At the time of writing, Morris is affiliated with both the Department for Cultural Studies at Hong Kong’s Lingnan University and the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Grosz is employed in the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University in the U.S.
27 Keating was Federal Treasurer at the time Morris’ paper ‘Ecstasy and Economics’ was initially delivered (1990) and he became Australia’s Prime Minister in December 1991.
“indicative of the strength and viability of feminist ideas and book markets in the mid-1990s” (Ibid).

The impact of Australian feminism on ‘local’ and ‘global’ publishing circles becomes evident when considering the publishing histories of my selected texts. *The Lesbian Heresy* was published by Spinifex and was distributed in America and Britain, where it became the subject of heated debate amongst feminists and theorists of sexuality. *The First Stone* and *The River Ophelia* were published by Picador, an imprint of the multinational Pan Macmillan (Pan Macmillan website). *Bad Girls* was published by Allen and Unwin, which is based in New South Wales and which “has work(ed) closely with subagents and publishing houses around the world to achieve the best possible English language and translation rights sales” (Allen and Unwin website). *Eat Me* was published by Text Publishing, a Melbourne company that was established in 1989, and (as I will discuss in Chapter Five) this novel has been distributed overseas (Galligan, 2007, pp.46-8).

In this chapter, I have argued how and why my selected texts are important. These texts and their critics frame the feminist debates which they engage with as conflicts between feminist generations. The metaphor of generational conflict was a popular one within and outside Australia during the mid-1990s, though it is not intellectually or politically helpful. As I have argued, it is more useful to understand these debates as having emerged from the ‘culture wars’. A close study of these texts reveals how (like the culture wars in general) diverse feminist perspectives on a range of sex-related issues differ from and converge with other, as well as with the New Right. I have situated the emergence of the culture wars within Australia in the broader context of the “global cultural flows” that have been a characteristic feature of globalisation. Appadurai’s model of “global cultural flows” can also help explain the increasingly transnational nature of both ‘Australian writing’ and ‘Australian feminism’. I have argued that the publication of my texts marks the historical moment when Australian feminist writing began to make a particularly active contribution to international feminist debates about the relationship between sex and power.
Chapter Two
The First Stone: Sexual Harassment at University

I was dreaming of the past
And my heart was beating fast

(John Lennon, ‘Jealous Guy’)

I don’t see how you can unravel those two threads, sex and power, so neatly. They’re tightly entangled.

(Garner, 1995a, p.99)

Critical responses to The First Stone have generally focused on the sense of mother-daughter feminist conflict that Helen Garner evokes. This focus is understandable and in many respects laudable, but it does not reveal anything new about the text. I contend that it is more useful to investigate what Garner’s book says about Australian feminism and Australian writing in the mid-1990s. I argue that the feminist stance Garner takes in The First Stone is influenced by a number of political and theoretical sources. These include the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s and the work of U.S. commentators such as Camille Paglia. I argue that Garner may identify as a feminist but her hostility towards academic feminism is not dissimilar to that of the New Right. Specifically, I emphasise how Garner conflates a number of feminist perspectives on sexual harassment into a single perspective which she suggests is fixated on female victimisation. Garner attributes this victim-fixated feminism to ‘young’ women and academic feminists.

Sexual Harassment and/in the University
Defining the term ‘sexual harassment’ can be difficult because “no two people seem to agree about what it is” (Riggs et al, 1993, p.13). Robert O. Riggs et al provide a usefully broad definition in their book Sexual Harassment in Higher Education (1993):

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of
an individual’s employment; (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting such an individual; or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. (Ibid, pp. 2-3)

They argue that “harassers and victims may be male or female” (Ibid, p.5). This is true, though a majority of sexual harassment victims are female. Instances where women sexually harass men are rare and thus “marked for their unusualness” (Hawthorne, 2002, p.35). Any person who is affected by the harassment – the victim/s and/or those who bear witness to it, for example, co-workers – “could have a valid complaint” (Riggs et al, 1993, p.3).

Objecting to sexual harassment is seldom easy. I will briefly outline three factors that can make it difficult for harassment victims to take action against their harassers. All three are suggested (albeit in quite different ways) in *The First Stone*. The first is “a feeling of discomfort because of a lack of conclusive proof of the alleged event” (Ibid, p.21). Sexual harassment “usually occurs in private” and “often no hard evidence exists that could be presented in a hearing” (Ibid, p.xi). The second factor is “a fear or retaliation or reprisal” (Ibid, p.21). In the workplace, “retaliation” and “reprisal” could mean that the harassment victim loses his or her job as a result of complaining. This is particularly true if the harasser occupies a higher level of authority within the particular organisation, for example, he/she is the employer of their victim (Ibid). The third factor is the tendency to “minimise” and even deny sexual harassment (Kelly and Radford, 1996, p.19). Feminist researchers Liz Kelly and Jill Radford argue that “malestream knowledge” – knowledge which supports a primarily (sexist) male standpoint – “operates by a strategy of inclusion and exclusion, including what men define as violating/abusive and excluding much of what women experience as violating/abusive” (Ibid, p.20).

During the 1970s and 1980s, feminists began to speak out about sexual misconduct in all its forms (Serisier, 2007). These forms include sexual harassment, as

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28 In her provocative essay ‘The Teacher’s Breasts’ (1994), Jane Gallop asks whether sexual relationships between male students and female teachers can be considered sexual harassment. I discuss this essay briefly in Chapter Five, in relation to the (fictitious) student-teacher affair that is depicted in *Eat Me.*
well as rape (Brownmiller, 1975) and incest (Ward, 1984). This early work was not without its flaws: for example, Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 study of rape entitled *Against Our Will* has been criticised for its reliance on negative racial stereotypes (Serisier, 2007). Nevertheless, this work is important because it helped popularise the belief that sexual violence has been “a key element in male power over and control of women” (Radford et al, 1996, p.3). Early feminist researchers of sexual violence argued that by “naming” the forms of sexual danger that women face, they were “naming what must change” (Ward, 1984, p.212).

Indeed, sexual violence is an underlying theme in all of the debates which my texts engage with. In Chapter Three, I address debates over whether heterosexual sex is tantamount to rape, or is at very least yet another example of men’s power over women. The texts I address in the final chapters engage with debates about whether S/M is another term for sexual degradation, and whether sexually explicit cultural representations always eroticise sexism. *The River Ophelia* (which I address in Chapter Six) also intervenes in debates about sexual consent and the representation of sadism in popular culture. In that chapter, I argue that debates about the allegedly harmful nature of pornography have closely resembled – and overlapped with - debates about the harmful nature of cultural representations that feature graphic violence.

Catherine MacKinnon is a name that will recur throughout this thesis. MacKinnon is perhaps best known nowadays for her work on pornography, which I will discuss in Chapter Four. She initially rose to prominence in feminist circles with her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979). This text offers one of the first feminist analyses of sexual harassment. MacKinnon focuses her analysis on sexual harassment in the workplace, though it has relevance to other institutional settings. MacKinnon’s main argument is that sexual harassment “uses and helps create women’s structurally inferior status” (MacKinnon, 1979, p.10). This inferior status is further suggested in “the belief that females say ‘No’ even when they mean ‘Yes’” (Tyler and Boxer, 1996, p.22). This ‘no means yes’ attitude has been expressed by men who sexually violate women, and suggests that women will always be – and always want to be - sexually available to men.

In this chapter, I focus upon sexual harassment in the context of the university, as this is the issue that Garner uses to advance her broader argument about feminism in the
1990s. I specifically address the sexual harassment of students by members of staff. These ‘members of staff’ include academics and those men and women who hold positions of authority within university residential colleges. Staff members who sexually harass their students effectively disregard the duty of care and the professional boundaries they are meant to maintain between themselves and their students. Virginia Lee Stamler and Gerald L.S. Stone argue that “(o)wing to the nature of the professional relationship between the student and the faculty member, students are in vulnerable roles compared with the role of the professor” (Stamler and Stone, 1998, p.7). Again, female students and staff members are most likely to experience sexual harassment. These students and staff members are (as with any other sexual harassment victim) likely to suffer feelings of “helplessness” (Riggs et al, 1993, p.27). They might also fear – and indeed, experience – “loss of references” and job opportunities “from the institution or department where the harassment occurred” (Ibid).

**Feminist Critics of Feminism**

Not all women have actively resisted what Faludi calls the ‘backlash against feminism’. Women have held important roles in right-wing organisations across the world (Bacchetti and Power, 2002; Hardisty, 1998). There are also conservative women who have remained politically unaffiliated, but who have (in different ways) championed traditional gender roles (Dworkin, 1979; Rowland, 1984). In this chapter, I focus on U.S. writers such as Rene Denfeld (1995), Camille Paglia (1992 and 1994), and Katie Roiphe (1993), as well as Australian writers such as Bettina Arndt (1995). These women identified as feminists, and this is something that many avowedly right wing women would not do. However, these feminists have still expressed the same hostility towards feminism which has also been expressed by the New Right. I now consider some of the arguments made by writers such as Denfeld and Paglia. These are arguments that Garner advances in *The First Stone*.

Significantly for this thesis, the opposition towards feminism that feminists such as Denfeld and Paglia voiced was frequently been framed in terms of generational warfare. One of their key arguments was that “today’s feminists” – feminists in the 1990s - were making women unnecessarily fearful of sexual misconduct. Denfeld argues:
In the name of feminism, these extremists have embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother’s day – back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness. (Denfeld, 1995, p.10)

In advancing such arguments, these writers seem to long for what bell hooks sarcastically refers to as “the good old days before feminism and multiculturalism and the unbiased curriculum fucked everything up” (hooks, 1994, p.86). Hooks’ reference to the “unbiased curriculum” is apt, for these critics of feminism usually identified academic feminists as chief exponents of the puritanical, fear-mongering feminism of “today”. Paglia (who has herself been employed as an academic) suggests the reason behind her hostility towards other academic feminists in an interview on the subject of date rape on US campuses.

… I see where this whole date-rape thing is coming from. I recognize the language of these smart girls who are entering the media; they are coming from (elite American universities). They have this stupid, pathetic, completely-removed-from-reality view of things that they’ve gotten from these academics who are totally off the wall, totally removed. (Paglia, 1992, p.60)

The suggestion is: academic feminists are absorbed in theory, and cannot see that male dominance and female submissiveness are innate and unchangeable. This fact is, presumably, evident to women and men in the world ‘outside’ the university. Roiphe argues that a man is acting on “natural” instincts when he glances down a woman’s shirt (Roiphe, 1993, p.98). More explicitly, Paglia argues that “(h)unt, pursuit, and capture are biologically programmed into male sexuality” (Paglia, 1992, p.51). Paglia suggests, though, that women actually wield “sexual power” over men (Ibid, p.52). According to Paglia, a “girl” who “goes upstairs alone with a brother at a fraternity party is an idiot” (Ibid). This “girl” must accept blame if the man sexually violates her.

There are four striking features of the arguments advanced by commentators such as Paglia and Roiphe. These features are also evident in the broader New Right attacks
against a supposed left-wing bias in the university. The first feature is the conflation of various feminist viewpoints into a single, monolithic viewpoint. An example of this conflation can be found in the following passage from one of Paglia’s essays.

Neither militant feminism which (sic) is obsessed with politically correct language, nor academic feminism, which believes that knowledge and experience are “constituted by” language, can understand verbal or preverbal communication. Feminism, focusing on sexual politics, cannot see that ...(s)exual desire and arousal cannot be fully translated into verbal terms. (Ibid)

In passages such as this, Paglia conflates different strands of feminism into a single and easily identifiable enemy. This enemy is variously referred to as “feminism”, “militant feminism” and “academic feminism”. More broadly, Paglia creates a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminisms. The ‘bad’ feminist perspective is the one that over-emphasises women’s vulnerability to sexual danger. The ‘good’ feminist perspective is libertarian in nature: it emphasises the liberating nature of sex for women and assumes that the power imbalance between men and women is not as important as other feminists suggest.

The second striking feature of the arguments expounded by Paglia, Denfeld and Roiphe is their use of crude stereotypes. These stereotypes have been borrowed randomly from popular culture and mythology. The first of these is the ‘femme fatale’. This stereotype gained prominence in 1940s noir films such as *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). The femme fatale has traditionally functioned as a receptacle for “cultural anxieties about women” (Stables, 1998, p. 165).²⁹ In the classic noir narrative, the femme fatale is a sexually active and alluring woman who lures an unsuspecting man to his personal and professional downfall. The second stereotype, and one which is closely linked to the first, is that of the ‘vengeful woman’. According to

²⁹ There have been feminist reclamations of the femme fatale. One example can be found in *Eat Me* (as I describe in Chapter Five). Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that Garner was attempting this kind of reclamation in *The First Stone*.
Australian historian Marilyn Lake, this stereotype “taps deep into cultural anxieties about women’s power and capacity for revenge” (Lake, 1995, p.30). For some feminist-identified critics of feminism, feminism itself is evidence that women are capable of taking out “revenge” against men. These men are invariably seen as being harmless and helpless. Bettina Arndt, for example, has criticised “sexual harassment legislation and amendments to the Victorian Domestic Violence Act” because they threatened to “usher in a new era of … retribution by feminist ideologues with a victim mentality and a taste for ‘vengeance’” (cited in Davis, 1997, p.25).

The third striking feature of the arguments made by the commentators I have mentioned is their individualism. They seem to suggest that their own opinions about feminism are shared by all – or at least most – of their readers; and that these opinions are beyond criticism. Rene Denfeld, for example, argues that feminist critiques of sexual violence – she refers specifically to the work of theorists such as MacKinnon - are evidence of a “New Victorianism” (Denfeld, 1995, p.11). Denfeld argues that this “New Victorianism” is “the reason why feminists of (her) generation are abandoning the women’s movement” (Ibid, p.11). Denfeld suggests that her own opinions about the work of theorists such as MacKinnon were shared by all feminists in her age group (she was in her mid-twenties when The New Victorians was published in 1995).

The fourth striking feature of the arguments I have been describing, and one which is related to the first three, is a sense of political defeatism. There is no suggestion that male behaviour can be changed, or that sexual violence can be at least minimised. Consider Paglia’s argument that “hunt, pursuit and capture are biologically programmed into male sexuality”. Consider Denfeld’s argument that feminists who have opposed sexual violence are really trying to bring back “sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness”. The rhetorical question that underpins these arguments this: why try to prevent sexual harassment when men’s sexual abusiveness and women’s ability to provoke this abusiveness is ingrained in their biological makeup?

The First Stone and Feminist Perspectives on Sexual Harassment
The First Stone generated controversy when it was published in March 1995. This controversy was played out in academic journals, newspapers, magazines, television
programs and talk-back radio shows in Australia. Some critics praised Garner’s book for its “political incorrectness” (Goldsmith, 1996, p.5). The First Stone was awarded the 1995 Book of the Year Prize by the Eros Foundation, “a libertarian pro-pornography” lobby group in Australia (Bell and Klein, 1996, p.xxi). Conversely, the three years following 1995 saw the publication of several texts that vociferously opposed Garner’s stance on feminism. These texts are Generation F (1996), Bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life (1997), and Talking Up: Young Women’s Take on Feminism (1998).

The main criticism that is levelled against The First Stone in these texts concerns the way that Garner portrays “feminism as a mother-daughter conflict” (D’Arcens, 1998, p.106). In her contribution to Talking Up, Louise D’Arcens disputes Garner’s suggestion that feminist “mothers rather than the daughters … are progressive” (Ibid, p.108). Virginia Trioli responds similarly in Generation f. According to Trioli, Garner reproduces a familiar scenario in which an older feminist mother becomes “resentful at her daughter’s rejection of her ways and jealous of a new culture that aims to protect … control over her body” (Trioli, 1996, p.108). In this scenario, the older feminist is “in awe” of her daughter’s “cool ability” to respond to instances of sexual harassment (Ibid). Nevertheless, the older feminist (in this case, Helen Garner) is “unwilling to let her assume authority for fear that it extinguishes the mother’s own” (Ibid).

Debunking the generational stereotypes in The First Stone is necessary, but this alone does not reveal anything new about Garner’s text. Critics such as Trioli and D’Arcens simply argue that dividing feminists into “older” and “younger” groups is problematic. They do not look beyond the generational stereotypes that Garner evokes. Indeed, some of these critics make age-based generalisations of their own. For example, Trioli argues:

Contemporary feminism has become a philosophical and political ethos so accepted by a younger generation of Australian women that they don’t even bother to explain it. Feminism now incorporates so wide a spectrum of thinking and action that some older feminists cannot get a grip on it. (Ibid, p.9)
Trioli is far more willing than Garner to acknowledge the diversity of 1990s feminism. Yet even for Trioli, generational differences seem to account for the most significant differences between feminists. A “younger generation of Australian women” have “accepted” “contemporary feminism”, she suggests. Conversely, “older” feminists are “unable to get a grip” on “contemporary feminism”. I argue that it is more fruitful to consider how exactly Garner uses the metaphor of generational conflict to frame the differences and tensions between certain feminist perspectives on sexual harassment.

Also, I argue that it is useful to regard The First Stone as an extension of both the feminist-identified criticism of feminism that I described earlier, and Garner’s own politics and literary output. Early in her writing career, Garner criticised the way in which the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s prioritised male sexual demands. Since then, however, her feminism has (as I suggest) displayed shades of sexual libertarianism. Garner has also displayed some opposition towards what she considers to be a victim-fixated feminism. This opposition was evidenced long before her book about the Ormond sexual harassment episode was published.

By approaching The First Stone from these angles, we can move away from reading the text as a straightforward account of conflict between ‘older’ and ‘younger’ feminists. We can also move away from another simplistic and generation-based reading. According to this second reading, Garner’s text exemplifies a “baby boomer shift from perceived radicalism to conservatism” (Gelder and Salzman, 2009, p.180). This kind of reading is problematic firstly because in The First Stone, Garner portrays herself as being politically and sexually radical; it is young women who are seen as being conservative. Secondly, this reading assumes that there are no “continuities in … themes and attitudes” in Garner’s work, feminist or otherwise (Ibid). That assumption is incorrect, as I will demonstrate.

Since the 1970s, Garner has been “one of Australia’s most admired and most argued-over writers” (Richardson, 1997, p.96). Garner has published across a range of genres: novels, short stories, journalism, film scripts. Much of this writing has depicted ‘real-life’ incidents (Legge, 2008), some of which have unfolded in Melbourne’s inner-northern suburbs. In Garner’s work, this part of Melbourne has been portrayed as a site of sexual excess and risk. Her debut novel Monkey Grip (1977) focuses on volatile sexual
relationships and drug use in Fitzroy share-houses during the 1970s. Garner has written about being sacked from her teaching job at Fitzroy High School in 1972 for conducting an explicit and impromptu sex education class (Garner, 1996). The events that are described in The First Stone took place in Parkville, a short walk from Fitzroy.30

Garner has publicly identified as a feminist, and has engaged with feminist theory in much of her writing. In Monkey Grip, the chief protagonist – a single mother named Nora - alternates between embracing “the traditional ideology of romantic love” (whereby women are seen as dependent on men) and being an independent woman (Goldsworthy, 1996, p.6). Garner’s short story ‘Pornography: Some Positions’ (1981) comprises an imaginary debate between an anti-pornography feminist and a man. The debate focuses on Beatrice Faust’s book Women, Sex and Pornography (1980). The feminist calls Faust a “ratbag” for rejecting the view that pornography leads to rape (Garner, 1981, p.147). The male character commends Faust for avoiding “feminist orthodoxy where it starts heading for hatred of men, or censorship, or puritanism” (Ibid, p.148).

This criticism of “feminist orthodoxy” made by this fictitious man anticipates the approach towards feminism that Garner takes in The First Stone. This approach, as well as being dismissive, is libertarian in nature. There have been several distinctly “libertarian moments” throughout Australian history (Sullivan, 1997a, pp. 125). Throughout The First Stone, Garner refers appreciatively – and nostalgically - to a particular libertarian moment that impacted on Australia and, indeed, much of the Western world: the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. This “revolution” was premised on the belief that “free sexual expression was both healthy and desirable if personal and social liberation was to be achieved” (Ibid, p.133). In a 1973 article published in the activist magazine Melbourne Feminist Collection, Garner criticised this “revolution” for prioritising male sexual pleasure at the expense of women’s liberation (Garner, 1973). Garner’s political stance is far removed from the stance she takes in The First Stone, in which she reflects that woman of her “generation” had “good fortune …

30 This minor trend in Garner’s writing changed with her most recent novel The Spare Room (2008), in which Melbourne’s inner northwestern suburbs set the scene for a somber and controversy-free narrative about friendship and death.
no Aids (sic), freed by the pill, we had a large, safe area, for ‘play’” (Garner, 1995a, p.47). She contrasts this with young feminists in the 1990s. According to Garner, these women have become irrationally “consumed by rage and fear” (Ibid).

It is significant that, in The First Stone, Garner addresses the issue of sexual harassment at university. This issue was explored in the work of Paglia, Roiphe and Denfeld. The issue of sexual harassment at university was also explored in number of Australian texts published during the mid-1990s. These texts include Eat Me and The River Ophelia. They also include Cassandra Pybus’ book Gross Moral Turpitude, David Williamson’s play Brilliant Lies and George Miller’s film Gross Misconduct (all 1993). As I have suggested, and indeed will continue to suggest, the university has been a hugely significant site for the production of feminist theory. This includes work on sexual violence.

As in Gross Moral Turpitude, the instance of on-campus sexual harassment that is documented by Garner has its genesis in fact. This instance took place at Ormond College, a residential college at Melbourne University, and began to unfold in October 1991 when five female Ormond students filed “informal complaints of sexual harassment” against Dr. Alan Gregory, then the College Master (Mead and Lohrey, 1995, p.166). They alleged that this harassment took place at a student party (referred to as a ‘smoko’) following the Valedictory Dinner held at Ormond that month (Ibid). In March 1992, the College Council released a statement declaring that “although it believed the students had acted in ‘good faith’”, they still “reaffirmed its confidence in the Master’s ability to continue in his position” (Ibid). Shortly afterwards, two of these students reported their harassment to the police (Ibid). Gregory was subsequently found guilty on one count of sexual harassment and not guilty on the other. In May 1993, Gregory officially resigned from his position at Ormond (Ibid).

Garner states that her “aim is not to take sides or make judgments” (Garner, 1995a, p.59). Her book’s sub-heading is “some questions about sex and power”. This

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31 Gross Moral Turpitude was based on a case of alleged sexual harassment at the University of Tasmania during the 1950s. This harassment case has been referred to as the ‘Orr Case’, after the alleged harasser, Professor Sidney Sparkes Orr. Gross Moral Turpitude’s author, Cassandra Pybus, responded critically to The First Stone in an article published in Australian Book Review (Pybus, 1995).

32 For an overview of the residential colleges at Melbourne University, see McCamish (2008, pp. 173-86).

I thought … that, at fifty, I might have forgotten what it was like to be a young woman out in the world, constantly the focus of men’s sexual attention. Or maybe I was cranky that my friends and sisters and had got ourselves through decades of being wolf-whistled, propositioned, pestered insulted … and worse without the big guns of sexual harassment legislation to back us up. (Garner, 1995a, p.59)

Overall, though, *The First Stone* is less concerned with the facts surrounding the Ormond case than it is concerned with the political disagreements Garner has with certain feminists. These include ‘younger’ feminists. According to Rosi Braidotti, the primary image that one takes from *The First Stone* is one of Garner “flagellating the hordes of (younger) allegedly Stalinist feminists in the name of free speech and sexual freedom” (Braidotti, 1997, p.143). Garner never uses the word ‘Stalinist’, though she does suggest that young women follow a single and homogenous strand of feminism which opposes “free speech and sexual freedom”.

At one point, Garner suggests that her “younger” feminist opponents support “radical feminism” (Garner, 1995a, pp.41-2). Many of the prominent early analyses of sexual harassment and sexual violence were indeed written from a radical feminist perspective (MacKinnon, 1979; Ward, 1984). Garner may have been aware of this, and also the negative connotations that have been associated with the term ‘radical feminism’. This term tends to conjure up images of unattractive, misandrist, anti-pleasure women. As Diane Bell and Renate Klein argue, “radical feminism is the feminism that everyone loves to hate” (Bell and Klein, 1996, p.xxiv).

Nevertheless, the 1990s saw a number of feminist analyses of sexual harassment that drew from standpoints such as poststructuralism. One example is Laura Ring’s essay ‘Sexual Harassment and the Production of Gender’ (1994). Ring concurs with Foucault’s definition of subjectivity as “a technique of power which ‘makes individuals subjects’; it invests subjects in their own ‘identity’, and ties them to it ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’” (cited in Ring, 1994, p.133).
For women, the sexually harassing exchange seems productive of feminine subjectivities in its violation of the integrity of the self; it challenges women to assume gender appropriate positions and thereby affirm male gender-power positioning at the expense of female self-assertion and self-determination. (Ibid, p.134)

This reads as being similar in spirit to MacKinnon’s analysis of sexual harassment. Note, though, that Ring addresses the ways in which women have seen themselves as inherently vulnerable to sexual harassment and/or have unconsciously “assume(d) gender appropriate positions … at the expense of female assertion and self-determination”. Ring cites the example of a young woman she interviewed for her essay. In a bid to protect herself, this young woman adopted a faintly maternal “ethic of care” towards her potential harasser and asked him questions such as “what is your name, where do you live?” (Ibid).

By focusing on women’s unwitting complicity with their sexual harasser, feminists such as Ring have moved away from understanding sexual harassment strictly in terms of male domination and female subordination. Women who are sexually harassed are still victimised as women, but they are not viewed as being completely without agency. Feminist legal studies scholar Carol Smart concurs with Ring when she argues that “while there are specific modes of deploying power in ways which are expressly gendered”, they “do not seek always to depict women as the powerless ones” (Smart, 1995, p.7). Furthermore, Ring suggests that just as sexual harassment can “produce” restrictive gender roles, so too can it be a site in which these roles are “transformed” (Ring, 1994, p.130). This transformation could, Ring argues, take place in “women’s acts of resistance to sexual harassment” (Ibid). Ring reminds her readers, though, that resistance is not in itself “liberating” (Ibid). Some modes of resistance to sexual harassment – and one example of these is displaying an “ethic of care” towards a harasser - are “enabled by the same conventional discourses of gender which fix women’s oppression” (Ibid, p.130).
Thus, there are important similarities and differences between the analysis of sexual harassment provided by theorists such as MacKinnon and Ring. All concur that sex and power are closely related in the act of sexual harassment, yet they differ on how exactly this relationship is played out. These differences remain opaque to Garner. For Garner, there is one dominant feminist approach to sexual harassment. This approach stems from a deeply pessimistic branch of feminism which has set out to punish men such as Colin Shepherd. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted her observation that “sex and power” are “tightly entangled” (Garner, 1995a, p.99). Yet throughout The First Stone, there is no suggestion of how this sexualised power can be abused.

**Taking Sides: Feminist ‘Mothers’ and ‘Daughters’**

In terms of genre, The First Stone has commonly been classified as “literary journalism” (Ricketson, 1997). Garner reports on a real-life event, but this report is longer than a standard piece of journalism, and she has – for legal reasons - “invented names for all the characters” (Garner, 1995a, unpaginated ‘Authors Note’). Throughout the text, Garner describes her personal views on sexual harassment and feminism, as well as episodes from her own life. These views and life stories are combined with excerpts from interviews conducted with men and women who were (in many cases) associated with either Ormond or the Shepherd case. Garner appears to report “at face value” those views that most resemble her own (Davis, 1997, p.80). According to Mark Davis, “it’s the men who do the truth telling” in The First Stone (Ibid). I argue that it is middle-aged men and women whose sexual politics appear to be the most similar to Garner’s. Garner never queries or disputes these views. Conversely, she “intervenes straight away” when her interviewees express differing views and/or support for the Ormond complainants (Ibid). Significantly, many of these dissenting interviewees are portrayed as ‘young’ feminists.

Garner’s ideological bias is made evident in her responses the question which energises much of the book. This question is: Why did two of the complainants (whom she refers to as ‘Nicole Stewart’ and ‘Elizabeth Rosen’) report their alleged harassment to

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33 For the remainder of the chapter I will refer to these women by the pseudonyms which Garner gives them. I use inverted commas only when these pseudonyms are first mentioned. By using these pseudonyms, I acknowledge that I am not referring specifically to the ‘real-life’ complainants involved in the Ormond case. Instead, I am referring to Garner’s representations of these complainants.
the police? Her initial response is “Has the world come to this?” and her attitude does not change dramatically throughout the text (Garner, 1995a, p.15). This kind of attitude suggests how women’s experiences of sexual misconduct are commonly trivialised and treated as unimportant. Garner describes Shepherd’s actions as being “nerdish passes” (Ibid, p.38), and approvingly quotes a “businesswoman friend” as saying that “(m)en make light of (sexual harassment) and women make heavy” (cited in Ibid, p.81).

Also, Garner quotes ‘Janet F-’ (Suzy Nixon), the campus psychologist who “bec(a)me embroiled” in the alleged harassment at Ormond (cited in Ibid, p.44): “I said I thought both parties (the complainants and Shepherd) deserved to be respected, but that I found it hard to understand why the women were so angry - much angrier than most people I’d dealt with in similar circumstances” (cited in Ibid). The suggestion here is that there is a normal degree of anger that sexual harassment victims experience. Garner does not seem to regard this suggestion as being problematic, nor does she consider the politics of the institution in which the alleged harassment took place. As Kerryn Goldsworthy acknowledges, the complainants were no doubt aware that had they not reported their harassment to the police, it would have been simply “covered up and dropped” by the College Council” (Goldsworthy, 1996, p.67). This “would (have) convey(ed) the message that sexual harassment was condoned” at Ormond, and “that nothing, therefore, would change…” (Ibid).

In an attempt to comprehend the complainants’ anger, Garner recalls several incidents in her own life that might have constituted sexual harassment. In doing this, though, the individualism of her argument becomes apparent. For example, Garner describes an episode from her teenage years, in which (while travelling on a train) she allowed a drunken male passenger to kiss her. Garner acknowledges that she permitted this kiss “out of embarrassment, or politeness, or passivity, or lack of a clear sense of what I wanted” (Garner, 1995a, p.63). Garner then dismisses the man as being simply “absurd” (Ibid). The author does not concede that her response would not represent all women’s responses to unwanted sexual advances.

Elsewhere, Garner implicitly blames the complainants for their alleged harassment. She does this by advancing an argument commonly made by Paglia: that is, young women do not realise that they wield sexual power over men. Early in The First
Stone, Garner asks why a young woman would “feel ‘worthless’ when a man makes an unwelcome sexual approach to her?” (Ibid, p.89). She then dismisses the use of the term ‘worthless’ in this situation as “a bit of feminist sabre-rattling on behalf of a young woman who has not taken the responsibility of learning to handle the effects on men, of her beauty and erotic style” (Ibid). Garner refers specifically to the supposed “effect” that one complainant could have had upon Shepherd:

Can a young woman really expect to go through life without ever having to take responsibility? Has a girl like Elizabeth Rosen even the faintest idea what a powerful anima figure she is to the men she encounters in her life? She told the court that Dr Shepherd had got down on his knees before her. Which of them does the word humiliated apply to here? (Ibid; her emphasis)34

Garner’s portrayal of Rosen as a femme fatale glosses over the real power relations that existed between Shepherd and the students he allegedly harassed. Goldsworthy suggests that the women who brought these allegations to the police feared having their reputations tarnished “in a profession, law, in which both hoped eventually to practise” (Goldsworthy, 1996, p.67). Stewart herself admitted that she asked for a job reference from Shepherd in December 1991, after the alleged harassment took place, but before she reported the incident to the police (Garner, 1995a, p.29). When a male Queen’s Counsel (QC) asked Stewart why she did not “slap” Shepherd in retaliation, Steward responded that she could not do this because she was “financially dependent” on the Master (cited in Ibid, p.127). Garner empathises with Stewart in this instance, and writes that her own response to the QC’s inquiry was: “You bastard … every woman in the room could answer that question” (Ibid). Despite this, though, Garner does not acknowledge how vulnerable Rosen and Stewart were in comparison with Shepherd.

Later in The First Stone, Garner attempts to explain Shepherd’s actions (without actually stating that he did or did not carry them out) by referring to ‘Eros’. According to

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34 The complainant referred to throughout The First Stone as ‘Elizabeth Rosen’ has accused Garner of portraying her as a “Jewish princess” (‘XX’, 1997, p.58). Docker (1995) provides a thorough analysis of the anti-Semitism that is implicit in Garner’s text.
Garner, ‘Eros’ is the “spark that ignites and connects” men and women in a sexual and/or romantic sense (cited in Ibid, p.112). Garner quotes a “laughing Catholic mother in her early fifties” as suggesting that it is women who initiate ‘Eros’ by “flirting” with men (cited in Ibid). Garner expresses a similar view when she argues that “love” is “the spell” that women use to “put (the man’s) sexual fear to sleep” (Paglia, 1990, p.13). In reality, men who sexually harass women are not overwhelmed by female sexual power. Some women may “flirt” with men (and vice versa), but this does not mean that they necessarily “love” or want sexual interaction with them. According to MacKinnon, some women respond to unwanted sexual advances by “appearing flattered” (MacKinnon, 1979, p.48). They do this “in the hope (their harasser) will be satisfied and stop” (Ibid).

Garner criticises feminists for rejecting the ‘Eros’ myth and “tak(ing) the joy out of everything” (Garner, 1995a, p.113). It is instructive to look briefly at this ‘joyless’ feminism. Garner describes this as a “modern kind of feminism”, one that is “priggish, disingenuous, unforgiving” (Ibid, p.93). This feminism is practised by “cold faced, punitive girls” who have an “obsession with sexual harassment” (Ibid, p.100). Garner quotes Janet F-‘s argument that the Melbourne University student newspaper Farrago was being run by “puritan feminists” who “wielded a certain influence on campus” (cited in Ibid, p.45). Janet advises Garner that these women “pilloried” and “smeared” her as a result of her involvement in the Ormond harassment case (cited in Ibid, pp. 42 and 45). Janet speculates: “What happens to truth when rage and fear and ideological passions are on the rampage?” (cited in Ibid, p.42). Through these quotes and statements, Garner portrays “a monolithic ‘young’ feminist group that shares a common response to feminist thinking” (Davis, 1997, p.48).

The remarks about sexual harassment that are made by the ‘young’ feminists Garner interviews throughout The First Stone are actually quite varied. I am not suggesting here that these women belong to particular feminist ‘standpoints’; rather, that (despite what Garner might suggest) these women are not spouting a single, homogenous argument. Consider ‘Dr M’s’ (a female legal academic who is “in her thirties”) argument that “in heterosexual sex there’s an eroticisation of domination” (cited in Garner, 1995a, p.149). This argument has commonly been made by theorists such as MacKinnon.

Consider the views on sexual harassment that are provided by ‘Christine G’, who was the
Women’s Officer in Melbourne University’s Student Union around the time of the Shepherd episode. Garner quotes Christine as saying that a sexual harassment victim “can easily start to feel that (the) harassment is her fault – that she’s doing something to provoke it” (cited in Ibid, p.99; her emphasis). This argument is also common amongst feminist theorists of sexual harassment. MacKinnon, for example, argues that

women are socialized to passive receptivity; may have or perceive no alternative to acquiescence; may prefer it to the escalated risk of injury and the humiliation of a lost fight; submit to survive. Also, force and desire are not mutually exclusive under male supremacy. So long as dominance is eroticized, they never will be. Some women eroticize dominance and submission; it beats feeling forced.
(MacKinnon, 1989, p.177) 35

Earlier, I cited Laura Ring’s argument that women who experience sexual harassment have sometimes “assume(d) gender appropriate positions … at the expense of female assertion and self-determination”. Sharon Marcus argues that “(t)he grammar of violence … identifies (women) as objects of violence and because it offers the insidious inducement of a subject positions which assigns (women) an active role vis-à-vis fear …” (Marcus, 1992, p.394).

Conversely, consider Christine’s actual definition of sexual harassment. This is provided after Garner dismisses men accused of sexual harassment as being “just poor bastards” (Garner, 1995a, p.99). According to Christine, these men have “abused their power. Sexual harassment is ultimately not about sex. It’s about power” (cited in Ibid). This differs from MacKinnon’s argument that sexual harassment

… suggests a relationship between individual sexual relations and the edifice of unequal gender status as a whole. If women’s sexuality is a means by which her access to economic rewards is controlled, relations between the sexes in the process of production affect women’s position throughout the society, just as

35 This argument about eroticising dominance and submission has underpinned some feminist critiques of S/M, as I describe in Chapters Five and Six.
women’s position throughout the society makes her sexuality economically controllable. (MacKinnon, 1979, p.58)

Christine’s definition of sexual harassment is somewhat reminiscent of Foucault’s controversial argument “in favour of … making rape a civil offence akin to any other form of physical attack” (Woodhull, 1998, p.169). For Foucault, rape is more accurately understood as an abuse of power than as an example of how sex is used to exert power over another individual (see McNay, 1992; Plaza, 1980; Stephen, 1997). Unlike Foucault, though, Christine acknowledges that the power imbalance in sexual violence is a gendered power imbalance. Christine disputes the attitude she sees as having been taken by Melbourne University towards sexual harassment. She describes this attitude as: “Maybe the bloke didn’t mean it” (cited in Garner, 1995a, p.98). According to Christine: “Women are now saying, ‘I don’t care if he meant it or not – he did me harm’” (cited in Ibid).

For Garner, the only real difference between feminists is age difference, and she seems almost intent on seeing this as a barrier towards communicating with some of her interviewees. Christine, for instance, is described on several occasions as being “young” (Ibid, pp.96 and 99), and the reader is informed that she puts a “constant stress on passivity and weakness” (Ibid, p.99). Garner claims that she acts as a “political mother” (her term) to Christine (Ibid, p.97). She informs the younger woman: “As you get older … you begin to understand that a lot of men in these (sexual) harassment situations are weak” (Ibid, p.99; her emphasis). This line gives support to Trioli’s argument that, in the model of older feminist-younger feminist conflict which Garner evokes, the older feminist/‘mother’ is unwilling to allow the younger feminist/‘daughter’ to assume “authority”. Garner does not attempt to comprehend or empathise with Christine’s argument. Instead, Garner expresses her own, supposedly wiser views on men who sexually harass women. Christine could never comprehend these views because, Garner suggests, they arise only when one reaches Garner’s age.

In an important passage, Garner draws a comparison between her interview with Christine and uneasy interactions she has had with her own daughter. This is one of several passages in which Garner attempts to explain her hostility towards the Ormond
complainants as being related more to ‘personal’ problems than to ‘political’ differences. Garner claims that speaking with Christine reminded her of “days when I have visited my daughter and she has gone about her business in the house as if I weren’t there” (Ibid). Garner claims that such visits have made her feel “terrifically at a disadvantage, as if I were importuning her” (Ibid). For Garner, ‘young’ feminists such as Christine are ignorant of older feminists. Rather than trying to learn from older feminists, young feminists have become fixated on naive views about men, women and sexual violence.

Garner suggests her specific hostility towards academic feminists may be related firstly to her “old fear of professors and people with Ph.D’s” (Ibid, p.145). This fear, in turn, stems from her “own undistinguished and almost totally silent university career, thirty years ago” (Ibid). Secondly, Garner cites a possible “upsurge of rage” that she “had to swallow” after being sacked from Fitzroy High School (Garner, 1995a, p.40). It is important that Garner’s public profile in Australia has not rested on her academic credentials. Rather, this profile has been constructed from her journalism and “bestselling” fiction (Rooney, 2009, p.143). In The First Stone, Garner portrays herself as an “ordinary” member of the public – that is, someone who is not an academic: “Like many ordinary citizens I had often, over the years, used Ormond’s grounds as a thoroughfare on my way to work or the city” (Garner, 1995a, p.21).

Conversely, the university (in this case, Melbourne University) is portrayed as a domain of intense exclusivity in The First Stone, as is Ormond College itself. There are references to Ormond’s “ambitious and privileged middle class” students (Ibid, p.20). These students attended “the big Protestant private schools of Victoria” and are now studying to enter “the professions of law, medicine, engineering and science” (Ibid). Ormond is “a sort of home” to these students, but Garner suggests that it is also based on “an old dream … a community of scholars” (Ibid, p.21). The outward appearance of Ormond seems almost otherworldly in its decadence: Garner describes the “hallways … built on a scale so grandiose as to be almost comic” and the photographs of “students

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36 Garner has, however, held a fellowship at Janet Clarke Hall – incidentally, another residential college at Melbourne University (Janet Clarke Hall website).
puffing on manly pipes” that adorned the walls” (Ibid).37

By contrasting her “ordinary member of the public” persona with the exclusivity of the university, Garner taps into a sense of a “gulf between academic and activist feminists” (Wine, 1991, p.342). This “gulf” is further evoked in The Lesbian Heresy, as I will suggest in the following chapter. There are a number of differences (real and perceived) between academic feminists and feminists who do not work in academia. Academic feminists are paid to research on feminism. This may be viewed as a luxury and a privilege by other feminists.38 The U.S. scholar Terri Ann Wine warns of the “danger … of academic feminists becoming too overly committed to the development of theory, or too focused on a narrow slice of feminist scholarship and thereby neglecting the work of women seeking social change” (Ibid).

Yet unlike Wine, Garner is less interested in thoughtfully analysing the relationship between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ feminists than she is with simply criticising academic feminists. This is particularly evident in her interview with Janet. The latter reminds Garner that “our generation was all about sexual liberation” (cited in Garner, 1995a, p.46). This situation has changed because, according to Janet, “the women in their early thirties, who teach in universities now” are “angry at the notion that someone would invade another person, sexually” (cited in Ibid; her emphasis). Janet elaborates on this:

To them (young female academics) the whole thing is located in the discourse of power, and the abuse of power. They find it impossible to believe that a man would ever touch a woman’s breast, for example, without knowing he was exerting power. And the new ideology is that sexual harassment is a crime. If you get the opportunity to punish someone, you really ought to. (cited in Ibid)

37 I was employed a tutor at a Melbourne University residential college (not Ormond or Janet Clarke Hall) in the early years of my postgraduate studies. During this time, I did encounter rituals of college life that were based on long-held notions of hierarchy. One such ritual took place at dinner time several nights a week. Students would stand as the academic staff entered the dining hall. Academic staff would eat dinner on a ‘high table’ (a table on a stage overlooking the students). Students and staff wore academic robes for the duration of the meal.

38 There is no space here to describe the difficulties that women have faced in actually entering academia. For an overview of these difficulties, see Tara Brabazon’s essay ‘Skirt, Cap and Gown’ (2004). This essay also explores the increasingly dense and complex workloads that all Australian academics have faced since the 1980s.
In short, Janet criticises these academic feminists for failing to acknowledge that
“(sexual) harassment is always going to happen without people intending it to” (Ibid).
Garner concurs with this argument, and also informs Dr M- that “people in the university
aren’t like people in the outside world” (Ibid, p.150). In *The First Stone*, female students
are represented as vulnerable targets of ideological academics. Garner’s “cold-faced,
punitive” feminist students are taught by feminist scholars such as Dr M- to become
“freaked out (and) obsessed about sex” (cited in Koval, 1995, p.9).

I conclude this section of the chapter by looking closely at Garner’s argument
against the belief that sexual harassment is eradicable. This oppositional argument has
also been advanced by Paglia and Denfeld, and is used by Garner to support her
contention that 1990s feminists – and especially academic feminists – are ignorant of
reality. There is a body of literature that aims “to arm (women) with assertiveness” that
will help them “confront … sexual danger” (Stanko, 1996, pp.50-1). This includes work
on rape prevention by Pauline Bart and Patricia H. O’Brien (1985), as well the essays by
Ring and Marcus. No feminist has, to my knowledge, stated that sexual violence can be
immediately eradicated. Neither have they endorsed Garner’s argument that women
cannot be safe even under what she cynically refers to as “totalitarianism” (Garner,
1995a, p.163). Such an argument does not encourage women and men to *work towards
creating* a society free of sexual violence. Garner seems to accept that sexual violence is
an inherent and unchangeable aspect of everyday life.

**Just a “Poor Bastard”: “Victims” of a Feminist Conspiracy**

In this section, I investigate Garner’s portrayal of both herself and Shepherd as naïve and
unsuspecting victims of 1990s feminism. This victimisation is summed up in Shepherd’s
assertion that there was “a conspiracy … an organised attempt by a number of people to
get rid of me” (cited in Ibid, p.54). These “people” presumably include Stewart and
Rosen, women such as Christine and Dr M-, and the supporters of the complainants.
These supporters include ‘Mrs Barbara W’, who is quoted as sternly declining a request
by Garner to speak to her about the incident (Ibid, p.70). ‘Barbara’ is actually one of
several characters that are based on literary studies scholar Jenna Mead. Mead was a tutor
at Ormond during the time of the alleged harassment, and she provided the complainants
with assistance when they lodged complaints against Shepherd/Gregory. The complainants’ supporters also include the nameless Ormond “women” who, according to Shepherd, “had a big party in the college, to celebrate” his departure (cited in Ibid, p.54).

Significantly, Garner never questions Shepherd about the conspiracy in the rigorous manner that she questions why Rosen and Stewart brought their allegations to the police. I argue that Garner seems to suggest that Shepherd was innocent. Garner’s apparent belief in Shepherd’s innocence was first suggested in a letter she sent to Shepherd at the time of his court appearance in August 1992. The letter (which is reprinted in *The First Stone*) reads, in part:

… it’s heartbreaking, for a feminist of nearly fifty like me, to see our ideals of so many years distorted into this ghastly punitiveness … I certainly know that if there was an incident, as alleged, this has been the most appallingly destructive, priggish and pitiless way of dealing with it. I want you to know that there are plenty of women out here who step back in dismay from the kind of treatment you have received … (Ibid, p.16)

John Hanrahan has called this letter “irredeemably presumptuous” (Hanrahan, 1995, p.25), and it is difficult to disagree. In appearing to assume that Shepherd did not sexually harass his students, Garner aligns herself with those “women” who “step back” from the “kind of treatment” that Shepherd received (being arrested and subsequently forced to resign). These women would include Paglia, Denfeld and Arndt.

While Garner may show concern for Shepherd, there is no real acknowledgment of how Rosen or Stewart felt following their alleged harassment. According to MacKinnon, women who have been sexually harassed often “feel humiliated, degraded, ashamed, embarrassed, and cheap, as well as angry” (MacKinnon, 1979, p.47). The complainant referred to as ‘Elizabeth Rosen’ has elsewhere written about the anguish caused by Janet F-/Suzy Nixon’s suggestion that she was “lying” and “had misread the Master’s actions” (‘XX’, 1997, p.55). Garner does cite a newspaper article that mentions

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39 Garner has since admitted that she “regret(s) splitting (Mead) into half a dozen people” (Garner, 1996, p.178)
how “‘immeasurably’ affected” one of the Ormond students was by “the experience of the court case” (this student had just been arrested for drink-driving) (Garner, 1995a, p.67).

For most part, though, Garner focuses more on how Shepherd and his family suffered as a result of the charges and Shepherd’s subsequent resignation from Ormond. Shepherd’s wife tells Garner that her husband was a “victim” of the complainants (cited in Ibid, p.141). She is quoted as saying that the complainants caused the Shepherd family “grief” and ensured that Shepherd “won’t have a pleasant end to his life” (cited in Ibid). When Garner informs Shepherd’s wife about the drink driving charge, the wife replies: “… if she was drinking because she was traumatised, I should be drunk! Our whole family should be strung up on a rope!” (cited in Ibid; her emphasis). The suggestion is that Shepherd and his family experienced greater anguish than either of the complainants, or at least that the family’s suffering is more significant than either Stewart’s or Rosen’s.

Indeed, throughout The First Stone, the complainants are portrayed as being undeserving of sympathy. Garner uses quotes from interviews with Shepherd and several students who lived with Rosen and Stewart at Ormond to portray these women as angry, anti-male, and specifically anti-Colin Shepherd. Shepherd informs Garner that Rosen’s room at Ormond was found (by cleaners) to be “in an absolutely disgusting state”, and that he “punished” her by temporarily relocating her to a “very poor room” (cited in Ibid, p.5). This recollection functions in crudely metaphorical terms (there is the suggestion that Rosen is ‘trashy’), and it also supports the suggestion that Rosen had a reason to seek revenge on Shepherd. Stewart is described by a former Ormond student as an “intellectual” who “would stand up at Students’ Club meetings and say, ‘you stupid men’” (cited in Ibid, pp.133-4; Garner’s emphasis). A reporter to whom Stewart had granted an interview informs Garner: “She (Stewart) held an inflexible, politically correct line – as you do when you’re in your twenties” (cited in Ibid, p.215; my emphasis).

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40 This reference to a messy room brings to mind the female stalker (played by Glenn Close) in the film Fatal Attraction (1987). Close’ character lives in an inner-city meat-packing district, surrounded by smoke and grime. This is contrasted with the quaint suburban lifestyle of her male victim (played by Michael Douglas) and his family. The sexual politics of Fatal Attraction are particularly reactive, and Faludi (1990, pp.145-50) cites the film as a key ‘backlash’ text.
Conversely, the image of Shepherd that emerges in *The First Stone* is one of a dedicated and caring man who supported his colleagues and students, especially when they were women. Garner quotes the recollection of Shepherd’s wife that “early in his time at Ormond he had to get rid of certain ‘yahoos – troublemakers with very bad records of drunkenness and abuse of women’” (cited in Ibid, pp.50-1). Shepherd is also quoted as saying he had “addressed feminist concerns” from the moment he commenced his position at Ormond (cited in Ibid, p.51).

He appointed two female medical officers and a female librarian; and the two holders of the college’s prestigious visiting Scott Fellowship during his Mastership were women … Most ironic of all, in the light of later events, was his response when he discovered that Ormond had no policy on Equal Opportunity, and no ‘grievance procedures’ to advise him on how to correct this, he had set up an EO committee … (Ibid)

However, Shepherd was apparently naïve in regards to “developments in contemporary feminism” (Ibid). Garner quotes a male Ormond tutor as saying:

The Master is a representative figure. He’s the face of the patriarchy, of the institution. As with royalty, there’s no allowance for a lapse – no concept of a venial sin. And Colin was unaware of the sensitivity of his position. He doesn’t tune in. (cited in Ibid, p.23)

Thus, it is implied, Shepherd would not have understood how the position of ‘Master’ could have been seen as being representative of the patriarchy which “contemporary feminism” has vehemently decried. He could not have understood how easily he could become victim to this “contemporary feminism”.

The concept of victimisation has been debated at length by feminists. As Sharon Lamb (1999) points out, many women who have been sexually violated have felt that the ‘victim’ label renders them powerless and unable to recover from what they have experienced. Accordingly, some feminists have opted to use the term ‘survivor’. For
these feminists, “‘victim’ simply denotes the dead: sufferers of fatal abuse”, whereas “a ‘survivor’ is one who literally survives abuse” (Stringer, 2001). Lamb argues, though, that the ‘victim’ label is still important in that it indicates that these women been subject to “something (that is) endemic in our culture – male violence” (Lamb, 1999, p. 133).

Garner implies that the Ormond complainants are not victims because they have been supported by something else that is “endemic in our culture” – a well-organised and victim-obsessed strand of feminism. The real victims in The First Stone are Garner and Shepherd. In describing Shepherd’s victimisation, the scenario Garner evokes is that of a well-meaning but naïve middle-aged man being led to despair and ruin by conspiratorial women. This scenario has been played out many times in popular culture. Witness films such as Scarlet Street or Gross Misconduct (the latter focuses on a female university student who falsely charges her lecturer with sexual harassment).41 In this scenario, the man becomes the object of pity and the woman is duplicitous and destructive. Garner quotes Janet as saying that “Shepherd … felt as much of a victim as (the complainants) did. He felt deserted by Ormond” (cited in Garner, 1995a, p.43).

Garner portrays herself as a victim largely because the complainants declined her repeated requests for an interview. Garner claims she made “three brief and … courteous approaches” to the complainants, and that she was “surprised and sad that (they) saw” these attempts as “intimidation, provocation and harassment” (Ibid, p.83).

… I am amazed that I didn’t go straight to the addresses I had, and knock on the door. It would be nice to think that good manners or journalistic ethics restrained me; but the truth … has more to do with middle-aged women’s fears of their daughters. They despise us for the scruples and the patience we have had to learn from life. They have stolen from us the crude nerve of youth, and … they charge past us and rush out to fight, calling it politics. But it is painful; and in the face of their scornful energy we become timid. (Ibid, p.60)

41 Coincidentally, Gross Misconduct was shot at Melbourne University around the time that the events that comprised the Ormond harassment case were unfolding (Davis, 1997, p.89).
For Garner, the complainants – in denying her request for an interview – were being “scornful” and playing “politics”. The author portrays herself as the “timid” one who only wanted the complainants to be “patient” and talk with her. When Barbara/Jenna Mead declined an interview and advised Garner that her letter to Shepherd “upset” Rosen and Stewart, Garner momentarily adopts the role of a female student. Readers are informed that Barbara/Mead “work(ed)” Garner “as a headmistress works a fourth-former” (Ibid, p.70).

Mead has herself responded to Garner’s text on several occasions (see Mead, 1995a and b; Mead, 1997). Mead argues that “the key to The First Stone is (Garner’s) lack of interest in the truth” (Mead, 1995a, p.125).42 This, Mead suggests, is indicated by the author’s omission of crucial facts surrounding the case:

Helen doesn’t have to bother with the sheaf of documents disclosed by the Four Corners program on the Ormond case. Statements from more than seventeen witnesses which include both an eyewitness account of the events in question and a first-occurrence witness account. She can ignore the dodgy position of the Vice Master who, Colin Shepherd claims, was there on the night with him and presumably saw what there was to see … (Ibid, p.124)43

Mead criticises Garner’s portrayal of Shepherd/Gregory as “a kindly, domestic, fatherly man whose name represents pastoral care” (Ibid, p.128). Mead suggests that Garner would have been less able to construct such a glowing image of Shepherd had she acknowledged that there were apparently witnesses to his alleged actions at the ‘smoko’ (Ibid). Garner does quote an unnamed young woman as telling the QC that, at the ‘smoko’, an “upset” Nicole Stewart had informed her about Shepherd’s actions (Garner, 1995a, p.30). This important piece of information on the case appears at the beginning of The First Stone, but is not mentioned thereafter. Mead argues that if Garner had discussed

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42 This argument was originally delivered as a lecture at The Sydney Institute, a “privately funded not-for-profit current affairs forum” (The Sydney Institute website). Garner also gave a lecture at The Sydney Institute on the controversy surrounding her book (Garner, 1995b). Both Garner and Mead’s papers were published in the Institute’s journal, The Sydney Papers, at different points in 1995.

43 Four Corners is a current affairs program that screens on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission). Mead is referring to an episode of this program that was aired on 17 March, 1995 entitled ‘Sex and Power’.
the evidence that supported the harassment allegations, she would not have been able to portray Rosen and Stewart “as daughters in need of a mother’s advice” (with Garner portraying herself as the “good” “political mother” and supporters such as Barbara/Mead as “bad mothers”) (Mead, 1995a, p.126).

Mead suggests that Garner perceived Rosen and Stewart’s refusal to be interviewed by the author as “obstructing her research” (Mead, 1997, p.13). There is a sense that Garner felt the young women owed her an explanation of what had happened. This is again reminiscent of 1940s noir film narratives. In these narratives, a male detective attempted to unravel the mystery and enigma of the femme fatale (Kaplan, 1998). He did this through a complex process of interrogation and seduction. In The First Stone, Garner plays detective but is unable to unravel the mystery around what happened that night at Ormond College in October 1991. The femmes fatales at the centre of the case remain frustratingly silent.

“Afraid of Life”

The First Stone’s conclusion is one of its most controversial moments. I argue that it is the moment in which Garner most strongly reveals her hostile attitude to the feminism which she sees as being practised by young women in the 1990s. The author speculates on what might have constituted “a less cruel and more useful ending” to the harassment episode (Garner, 1995a, p.222):

If only Nicole Stewart and Elizabeth Rosen and their friends had developed a bold verbal style to match their sense of dress … If only the women’s supporters had been away on sabbatical leave … If the Master had been dashing, a biter of bullets (Ibid; her emphasis).

The First Stone ends with the following line: “If only the whole gang of them hadn’t been so afraid of life” (Ibid). This “gang” presumably includes the complainants, their supporters, and ‘young’ academic feminists. Garner has reinforced for the final time her belief that these women over-reacted to Shepherd’s behaviour at the ‘smoko’. He just
made some “nerdish passes”, and the complainants were being fearful and “vengeful” to suggest otherwise.

I have argued that *The First Stone* is an example of a feminist text which echoes the New Right in its hostility towards feminism, particularly academic feminism. I have argued that Garner (following U.S. writers such as Paglia) favourably contrasts her ‘older’ and libertarian sexual politics with the “puritanical” feminism that “younger” women in the 1990s were supposedly being taught by “younger” female academics. Garner does not acknowledge that “younger” feminists are diverse, and that there is no one feminist perspective on sexual harassment. Following the New Right commentators discussed in Chapter One, she conflates these perspectives into a monstrous single perspective. Conversely, I have argued that Garner portrays herself and Colin Shepherd/Alan Gregory as victims of a feminist “conspiracy”. Specifically, Garner acts as a “political mother” who has been snubbed by her feminist “daughters”. Shepherd is just a “poor bastard”, and was punished by “puritan feminists” who were “afraid of life”.
Chapter Three
Heterosexuality and Utopianism in The Lesbian Heresy

Any woman could be a lesbian
(Jeffreys, 1993a, p.ix)

I’ll get you into penetration
The gender of a generation
(Red Hot Chilli Peppers, ‘Can’t Stop’)

The feminist generational conflict that was evoked in The First Stone reappears in The Lesbian Heresy. Writing from a radical lesbian feminist perspective, Sheila Jeffreys suggests that the Western academy has fallen under the influence of poststructuralist feminism, which she sees as being exemplified in Judith Butler’s work. As a result, Jeffreys argues, ‘young’ feminist students have come to understand gender roles to be apolitical and voluntaristic rather than as being symptoms of women’s oppression. I argue that Jeffreys’ critics actually give weight to this argument when they criticise her for politicising sexuality. My contention is that The Lesbian Heresy provides an opportunity to investigating the complex differences and similarities between different feminist perspectives on gender and sexuality, and particularly heterosexuality. By doing this, we can avoid polarising these perspectives and also portraying lesbianism as utopian and therefore impossible.

Lesbianism, Heterosexuality and Utopianism

A central argument of The Lesbian Heresy is that heterosexuality reifies traditional gender roles. This argument is commonly associated with that strand of radical feminism which I will call ‘radical lesbian feminism’. I use this somewhat unwieldy term because it more accurately suggests the engagement of lesbians with radical feminism than do the terms ‘lesbian feminist’ or ‘political lesbian’ (I return to this point later in the chapter). Radical lesbian feminism flourished in America and Britain during the 1970s (Abbot and Love, 1972; Purple September Staff, 1975; Radicalesbians, 1973). In 1973, Australia’s own ‘Radicalesbians’ (a nationwide variation of a U.S. activist group by the same name)
held their first conference in Sorrento, Victoria (Reynolds, 2000, pp.142-7). Many radical lesbian feminists in Australia and overseas had been involved in women’s liberation and gay liberation, and had left these movements because of an anti-lesbian animus within them (Thompson, 1985). These feminists argued that becoming a lesbian

… was a revolutionary choice which, if adopted by millions of women, would lead to the destabilisation of male supremacy as men lost the foundation of their power in women’s selfless and unpaid, domestic, sexual, reproductive, economic and emotional servicing. It was to be the base from which we could reach out to dismantle men’s power. (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.ix)

According to this analysis, heterosexuality is the “beachhead” of male dominance (Rich, 1984, p.226). Heterosexual sex is seen as being particularly problematic. For Andrea Dworkin, “the paradigm of sex” between men and women “has been one of conquest, possession and violation” (cited in Moorcock, 1995).45

The approach towards heterosexuality that I have described has been controversial. Theorists such as Dworkin have been accused of arguing that “all intercourse (is) rape” – and specifically, that all heterosexual intercourse is rape (Ibid). The radical lesbian feminist critique of heterosexuality has also made for a tense relationship between radical lesbian feminists and heterosexual feminists. Denise Thompson reports that amongst the early radical lesbian feminists in Australia, heterosexuality was not seen as being “retrievable for feminist purposes” (Thompson, 1993, p.171). In Britain, The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group used the term “love your enemy” to suggest the predicament that they saw heterosexual feminists as facing (Thompson, 1991c). Socialist feminist Lynne Segal critiques this anti-heterosexuality stance in her book Straight Sex (1994). Segal contends that a “powerful strand of feminism … has … oversimplif(ied) the issue of heterosexuality” and aligned it with

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44 Many of the papers delivered at this conference have been posted on the website ‘Denise Thompson, Feminist Theorist’, [http://www.spin.net.au/~deniset/](http://www.spin.net.au/~deniset/)

45 Dworkin identified as a lesbian, though is not commonly identified as a ‘radical lesbian feminist’ in the way that theorists such as Jeffreys have been. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, Dworkin’s critical focus was more on “male-defined heterosexuality” than it was on lesbianism (cited in Zimmerman and Sayer, 1995, p.37). Also, Dworkin was famously married to gay male activist John Stoltenberg.
“women’s subordination” (Segal, 1994, p.215). This alignment has, she argues, created “a crisis of confidence” amongst heterosexual feminists (Ibid). In her review of *Straight Sex*, Wei Leng Kwok accuses radical lesbian feminists of portraying heterosexual women as “duped, complicit with oppression, (and) downright stupid” (Kwok, 1995, p.133).

*Straight Sex* is one of several books published from the mid-1990s onwards that have investigated heterosexuality from a feminist perspective. Other such texts include *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader* (1993), *Rethinking Heterosexuality* (1996), *Heterosexuality in Question* (1999), *Straight with a Twist* (2000) and *Yes Means Yes: Getting Explicit About Heterosex* (2002). The questions that are central to these texts include: Do heterosexuality and heterosexual sex always perpetuate female subordination and male domination? Can a woman identify as heterosexual *and* a feminist?

I will soon investigate whether the various feminist perspectives towards heterosexuality are mutually exclusive or in some ways compatible. Before doing this, however, I describe how exactly a conflict between radical lesbian feminism and poststructuralist feminism is suggested in *The Lesbian Heresy* and some of the critical responses to this text. I ask why it is significant that Jeffreys targets Judith Butler as the key proponent of the academic feminism which she sees as depoliticising the scholarly study of sexuality. Why does Jeffreys emphasise the apparently disastrous impact of Butler’s analysis on ‘young’ feminists? What do critics have to say about *The Lesbian Heresy*?

**The Lesbian Heresy and the “Depoliticising” of Lesbian Culture**

It is useful to now introduce Jeffreys, and particularly her institutional and geographical relocations and affiliations. Jeffreys moved from the U.K. to Australia in 1991 to take up a lecturing position in what was then known as the Department of Political Science at Melbourne University (Jeffreys, 1992 and 1994b). This institution is important to the thesis for several reasons. I have mentioned that Melbourne University is the location at which the events described in *The First Stone* took place, as well as the institution at which I have written this thesis. Jeffreys’ arrival came at a point when “sexuality studies” as an interdisciplinary field was in its infancy at Melbourne University (Marshall, 2005). This field flourished in the years following 1991. Throughout this chapter, I quote several
theorists of sexuality who have taught at Melbourne University at different points. These include Jeffreys, as well as Barbara Creed, Kathleen Fallon, Annamarie Jagose, Fran Martin and Robert Reynolds.

In Britain, Jeffreys was a member of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (Jeffreys, 1992). Jeffreys has long been a controversial figure in feminist circles. This controversy precedes the publication of *The Lesbian Heresy*. In a 1991 conference paper, Denise Thompson praised Jeffreys as “honest, courageous and a long-term battler for women’s liberation” (Thompson, 1991b). Conversely, the British transgender critic Roz Kaveney counts herself as a “known political opponent of Jeffreys” (Kaveney, 1993). According to Kaveney, Jeffreys’ political stance has been characterised by a sense of “elitism and knowing better than everyone else” (Ibid).

The year 1991 is important in the context of the argument I advance in this chapter. This was the year Jeffreys arrived in Australia. *The Lesbian Heresy* was published by Spinifex Press, which was founded in 1991 by the self-identified radical lesbian feminists Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein. Spinifex has “published a significant number of lesbian titles” from around the world, and these titles have been widely distributed within and outside Australia (Spinifex Press website). 1991 saw the appearance of the (now defunct) journal *Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*, which published scholarly articles by radical lesbian feminists (Thompson, 1992). In November of that year, the Lesbian Studies Weekend was held at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales. This event featured presentations by theorists such as Jeffreys and Thompson (Thompson, 1991b).

Yet by the early-to-mid 1990s, reports began to emerge that radical lesbian feminism was experiencing a global “backlash” that was parallel to “the backlash against feminism in general” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.x). These reports seem to have been made predominantly by self-identified radical lesbian feminists (Ibid; and see also Hawthorne, 2003; Raymond, 1989; Walters, 1996). Amongst the chief proponents of this “backlash” were, it was argued, lesbian feminists. An increasing number of lesbian feminists were endorsing practices (for example, butch-femme role playing) which supposedly eroticised traditional gender roles. They were using pornography and working in the sex industry. In doing this, the new breed of lesbian feminists was “depoliticising lesbian culture”
(Hawthorne, 2003) and portraying lesbianism as “nothing but pleasure and doing your own thing” (Thompson, 1992). At the same time, these lesbian feminists were failing to challenge patriarchally-defined heterosexuality.

Reports of a “backlash” against radical lesbian feminism are not ill-founded. The late twentieth century saw many political gains for women and lesbians,46 but the emergence of the New Right has had negative ramifications for these groups. I have mentioned the ‘backlash against feminism’. The 1980s saw the outbreak of HIV/AIDS. This disease became associated (at least in the popular imagination) with gay men, and this association helped usher in an aggressive new wave of homophobia (Altman, 1986). In 1988 there was an amendment to the Local Government Act 1986 in the U.K. which opposed the “promotion of homosexuality” (cited in Jeffreys, 1993a, p.60). This amendment (which is best known as ‘Section 28’) targeted gay men and lesbians (Ibid). As Jeffreys herself acknowledges, there were “unsuccessful attempts to pass similar legislation in the US and in Queensland, Australia” around this time (Ibid, p.x).

On a somewhat different register, by the 1990s, lesbianism was becoming frequently used as a marketing tool. Theorists such as Danae Clark (1991) have analysed the use of glamorous lesbian imagery in contemporary advertising. This kind of imagery also appeared in films such as Bound (1996), and popular music (witness the now-infamous 1993 Vanity Fair magazine cover featuring the androgynous lesbian singer k.d. lang being ‘shaved’ by supermodel Cindy Crawford, or Jill Sobule’s 1995 song ‘I Kissed a Girl’). This imagery was used partly to reach a burgeoning lesbian and gay niche market (Gluckman and Reed, 1997). Suggestions of lesbianism have also been used to market products to heterosexual consumers.

The Lesbian Heresy is framed firstly, and most broadly, as an analysis of lesbian feminist politics in an age of the New Right and neoliberalism. Jeffreys purports to critique firstly the “backlash” against radical lesbian feminism, and to this end she aligns her book with analyses of the “backlash against feminism in general” by Faludi and Naomi Wolf (1991). Jeffreys acknowledges these “backlashes” have been related to a broader wave of political conservatism in the final decades of the twentieth century.

46 Lesbians are also women, though Monique Wittig (1992) controversially argued that “lesbians do not participate in the social economy of woman-being” (Hawthorne, 2003a, p.237).
Jeffreys specifically refers to “AIDS hysteria” and the way that “(c)onservative groups and governments sought to scapegoat lesbians and gay men to divert attention from the widening social divisions that their economic policies were creating” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.x).

Jeffreys also frames *The Lesbian Heresy* as a critique of “sexual identities in late capitalism” (Hennessy, 2000). Jeffreys focuses on “lesbian sex industry”, a term she uses to describe the commodification of lesbian sexuality through lesbian pornography, S/M, prostitution and sex therapy. This industry is claimed to be an offshoot of the heterosexual sexual revolution described in the previous chapter. Jeffreys recalls discovering the impact of this “industry” in the U.S. during the mid-1980s, when “some lesbian feminist theorists and activists” began discussing “how some lesbian conduct had become … anti-woman” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.151). She cites examples from Australia and Britain to suggest this “lesbian sex industry” had expanded through the West, and thus was not exclusive to one particular country. Jeffreys cites the allegedly racist behaviour of a “British S/M dykes support group” during the 1980s (Ibid, p.183), and a 1992 workshop on safe sex for lesbians held in Melbourne. This workshop included an S/M demonstration and video screenings of pornography (Ibid, pp. 137-8).

My contention is that *The Lesbian Heresy* is less a critique of political conservatism or capitalism than it is a critique of theory. Jeffreys argues that many of the gains made by lesbians and feminists since the 1960s have been eradicated by poststructuralism. Jeffreys contends that “poststructuralism is a philosophy suited to conservative times, one which is committed to fatalism and non-action” (Ibid, p.xv). This philosophy “manages to look fashionable because many of its avatars were gay or sadomasochists or paid lip service to the politics of minorities” (Ibid).

The anti-poststructuralism evident in the above quote has a specific history in Australia. In Chapter One, I described anxieties that surrounded the arrival of “theory” in Australian intellectual circles during the 1980s. These include the anxiety that “theory” is ignorant of the everyday lives of men and women. They also include the anxiety that

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“import theory” was colonising ‘native’ Australian intellectual cultures.48 Susan Sheridan recalls a conference paper delivered in 1981 by Sneja Gunew and Louise Adler which “sparked off a major dispute” amongst feminist audience members because of its emphasis on “language stuff” (Sheridan, 1994, p.151). Gunew and Adler also raised the ire of some audience members by critiquing “empirical assumptions about ‘woman’ as a homogenous entity” (Ibid).

Amongst radical feminists, poststructuralism has often been understood as a phallocentric scourge on the academy. This perspective has appeared in a number of texts published by Spinifex Press alone. 1992 saw the publication of Nothing Matt(t)ers, in which U.S. scholar Somer Brodribb argued that poststructuralism – or “postmodernism”49, to use her term – is dominated by male theorists and interests. Four years later, the edited collection Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed (1992) contained an entire section devoted to radical feminist writings that thoroughly criticised poststructuralism. These writings include a reprint of Jeffreys’ critique of Butler (Jeffreys, 1996b). In the introduction to Radically Speaking, the editors argue:

Post-modernism represents women by differences, not similarities, and the power of the representer is masked. Because it declines to identify domination in general and male domination in particular, post-modernism cannot contest the relations of power. (Bell and Klein, 1996, pp. xxvi)

In a 1992 interview, Denise Thompson described poststructuralism as “just the latest ploy on the part of the boys to co-opt feminism” (cited in Thompson, 1992). Poststructuralist feminists, it seemed, were uninterested in generating woman-centred knowledge. Their energies were directed towards creating a new ‘feminist’ theory out of insights by scholars such as Foucault.

48 Significantly, one of the first self-fashioned ‘poststructuralist feminist’ texts published by an Australian theorist was Elizabeth Grosz’ Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (1989). The term ‘French feminist’ has commonly been applied to theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Michele Le Doeuff.

49 The relationship between ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘postmodernism’ has been the subject of extensive debate (Seidman, 1998, pp.214-52).
Jeffreys concurs with all of the above arguments against poststructuralism. Additionally, she provides a number of other reasons why poststructuralist theories are politically problematic, especially for feminists. For Jeffreys, poststructuralism is another word for sexual libertarianism, and also the way in which the perceived ‘otherness’ of certain sexual identities and practices is mindlessly celebrated within the academy. For Jeffreys, poststructuralism is a considerable shift from the grassroots and woman-focused feminist politics she identifies with.

In *The Lesbian Heresy*, Jeffreys argues that Butler’s work on gender performativity is a key contributing factor to the global “backlash” against radical lesbian feminism. Her choice of theorist is not arbitrary: since the early 1990s, Butler has been hugely influential amongst theorists of gender and sexuality. The publication of books with titles such as *Butler Matters* (2004) and *Gender Trouble Down Under* (1995) is evidence of this. The term “Butlerian” has been applied to work which is strongly influenced by Butler (Roden, 2005). Elsewhere, Butler has been described as “one of the superstars of ’90s academia” (cited in Gauntlett, undated).

I will make a disclaimer at this point, and this concerns the way Jeffreys uses the terms ‘poststructuralism’, ‘postmodern feminist’ and ‘queer’ interchangeably. This is understandable, to some extent. Butler has been aligned with feminism, postructuralism and queer theory (Breen and Blumenfeld, 2005; Butler, 1993c). Several critics of *The Lesbian Heresy* (I refer in particular to Robert Reynolds and Judith Halberstam) also write from these broad standpoints. For the purpose of this thesis, though, I refer to Butler’s work as an example of ‘poststructuralist feminism’. This is not my own understanding of ‘poststructuralist feminism’, or even a widely held understanding of that term. I am referring to Jeffreys’ idea of what ‘poststructuralist feminism’ might entail.

**Butler and Gender Performativity**

Butler’s analysis of the relationship between sex, gender and power was first advanced in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). I focus on this book, and several of Butler’s early-to-

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50 There have been radical lesbian feminist critiques of queer theory (Jeffreys, 1994a and 2003; Walters, 1996), and critiques of radical lesbian feminism by queer scholars (Reynolds, 1994; Kwok, 1995; Marshall, 2003). As Garber (2001) argues, critiques from both ‘sides’ tend to be framed as generational conflicts.
mid 1990s works because these are the works that Jeffreys addresses in *The Lesbian Heresy*. Butler’s work during this period is by now well-known, though for the sake of contextualisation, I will provide an overview. Butler opens *Gender Trouble* by investigating the assumption within feminist theory that the “category of women … not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (Butler, 1990b, p.2). This task has been “important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were misrepresented or not represented at all” (Ibid). Nevertheless:

There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of “the subject” as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute the category of women. (Ibid)

As Butler suggests: “If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is” (Ibid, p.4). The term ‘woman’ “fails to be exhaustive” because gender “is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and that it “intersects with” factors such as race, class, sexual identity (Ibid). Thus, “it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Ibid, pp. 4-5).

Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler seeks to “denaturalise’ gender” and critique “pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality” (Ibid, p.xxi). Specifically, Butler argues that the “foundational categories” of sex and gender are “productions that create the effect of the natural, the original and the inevitable” (Ibid, p.xxxi). In Butler’s analysis, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are more complexly related than many feminists have conceded. Butler argues that just as ‘gender’ has been commonly understood as an expression of ‘sex’, so ‘sex’ has been seen as the “natural” self that gender expresses. That is, “(if) gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way” (Ibid, p.9) “Gender hierarchy” alone is not “sufficient to explain the production of gender” (Ibid,
Nor can the “production of gender” be explained by the “universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination” (Ibid, p.5).

Central to Butler’s analysis is her argument that gender is “performative”. She elaborates on the concept of gender performativity in the following, oft-cited passage: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Ibid, p.45). In her essay ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’ (1991), Butler argues that gender is “a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (Butler, 1993b, p.313). She explains that “the naturalistic effects of heterosexualised genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect” (Ibid). In Butler’s perspective, “the ‘reality’ of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations” (Ibid). These “imitations” include gay and lesbian identities. Butler specifically cites those gay and lesbian identities that are based on what might be regarded as traditional gender roles, for example, “queens and butches and femmes” (Ibid). According to Butler, these “queens and butches and femmes” have been perceived to be “derivative” of the “heterosexual real” (Ibid).

By interrogating the category of ‘woman’, Butler intervenes in feminist debates about “difference”. Butler aligns herself with the “(t)he pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice” (Butler, 1990b, pp. 4 and 41). I discuss this “movement” (to the extent that it can be described as such) in the following chapters.51 Also, Butler draws on Foucault’s analysis of “sexuality as a political apparatus” (Foucault and Finnas, 1980, p.189). According to Foucault, sexual identities have traditionally been used to classify sexual behaviour as either ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ (Ibid; and see Foucault, 1976).52 Butler concurs with this argument:

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51 In Chapter Five, I describe Butler’s opposition to anti-pornography feminism.
52 In keeping with his gender-blindness, the homosexuality that Foucault focuses on is male homosexuality. Lesbianism rates barely a mention in his work.
… identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes whether as the normalising categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies. (Butler, 1993b, p.308)

Butler distances herself from the view that “lesbianism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism” (Butler, 1990b, p.173). She asks rhetorically that if to become a lesbian is understood as “a leave-taking of heterosexuality, a self-naming that contests the compulsory meanings of heterosexuality’s women and men, what is to keep the name of lesbian from becoming an equally compulsory category?” (Ibid; her emphasis). Butler does not provide an answer, but instead poses another rhetorical question: “If a lesbian refutes the radical disjunction between heterosexual and homosexual economies … is that lesbian no longer a lesbian?” (Ibid, pp.173-74).

Like Jeffreys, Butler has polarised readers. For critics such as Martha P. Nussbaum, Butler’s work exemplifies the obscurantism and political defeatism which they perceive as becoming entrenched within the academy. These critics argue that Butler’s work is an example of just how far “academic feminism” has shifted from “the practical struggle to achieve justice and equality for women” (Nussbaum, 1999). This new “academic feminism” is apparently more concerned with abstract theory than with ‘real-world’ misogyny and discrimination. Within the terms of Butler’s analysis, one cannot eradicate oppressive gender roles, they can merely “make fun” of them through drag performances and role-playing (Ibid).

The criticism of Butler’s work that I have just described is rehearsed in The Lesbian Heresy. For Jeffreys, as for Nussbaum, Butler’s work represents the depoliticising of academic feminism. However, while Nussbaum referred specifically to the U.S. academy, Jeffreys’ scope is (implicitly) more global. Jeffreys acknowledges that she has taught in different countries, and witnessed the destruction of radical lesbian feminist culture in each of these. In each culture, the destruction looks very much the

53 Nussbaum denounces the obscurity of Butler’s prose. This obscurity has been explored at length by several other critics, including Butler herself (see Butler, 2003; Stow, 2007, pp. 101-18).
same. Poststructuralist feminism has been one of the major destructive forces, and Judith Butler is its main proponent.

**“1970s” Gender “Objectors” and “Young” 1990s Feminists**
Jeffreys’ critique of Butler appears in a chapter of *The Lesbian Heresy* entitled “Return to Gender” (Jeffreys, 1993a, pp. 79-97). This chapter title neatly encapsulates Jeffreys’ argument that Butler (and, indeed, poststructuralist feminism in general) has “reinvented” gender “as play for those who see themselves far removed from the nitty gritty of women’s oppression” (Ibid, p.80). Jeffreys contrasts this stance with the stance taken by radical lesbian feminists. These feminists have been “conscientious objectors to gender … refusing to have any truck with it and refusing to act it out” (Ibid, p.82). According to Jeffreys, poststructuralist feminists have “declared” the “project” of exploding gender” to be “not just ill conceived but impossible” (Ibid). In the following paragraphs, I outline the central tenets of Jeffreys’ argument. These paragraphs may seem overly descriptive, but they are necessary for emphasising the sense of generational conflict that is evoked in *The Lesbian Heresy*.

According to Jeffreys, Butler’s “understanding of gender is … removed from a context of power relations” (Ibid, p.81). To support this point, Jeffreys’ cites Butler’s references to drag. In ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’, Butler argues:

> Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. (Butler, 1993a, p.313)

Jeffreys responds to Butler with a pair of rhetorical questions not dissimilar (though obviously informed by a different political perspective) to those which appear throughout *Gender Trouble*. The first is: “When a woman is being beaten by the brutal man she lives with is …would it be a solution for her to adopt a masculine gender for the day and strut about in a work shirt or leather chaps?” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.81). The second rhetorical
question is: “Will heterosexual women and men witnessing drag shows rush home and throw off gender, proclaiming to their spouses that there is no such thing as masculinity and femininity?” (Ibid, p.84). Jeffreys’ answer to both questions is: “This does not seem terribly likely” (Ibid). She argues that “male supremacy does not carry on just because people don’t realise gender is socially constructed …” (Ibid).

For Jeffreys, then, Butler’s refusal to advocate the elimination of gender roles is evidence of her political defeatism. As Jeffreys argues, seeing women adopting gender traits traditionally ascribed to men “will not be sufficient to extricate a woman from a heterosexual relationship when she will suffer … if she decides to slough off her oppression” (Ibid, p.85). Nussbaum has similarly argued that “(j)ust as actors with a bad script can subvert it by delivering the bad lines oddly, so too with gender: the script remains bad, but the actors have a tiny bit of freedom” (Nussbaum, 1999). According to Nussbaum, “Butler’s work is not directed at a non-academic audience eager to grapple with actual injustices” (Ibid). Jeffreys contends that poststructuralist feminists such as Butler have “little time for old fashioned talk of material power relations … for power that does not just play around but resides in the hands of particular classes and elites” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.80).

The “elites” that Jeffreys refers to would include men, as well as heterosexuals of both sexes. Jeffreys quotes Butler’s argument about heterosexuality: “That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it “knows” its own possibility of becoming undone” (cited in Ibid, p.81). Jeffreys dismisses this argument as “heterosexuality with a postgraduate degree” (Ibid). According to Jeffreys, Butler has become so entrenched in academic theories of sexuality that she cannot or will not identify heterosexuality as perpetuating – and also stemming from – women’s oppression.

Similarly, Jeffreys is critical of Butler’s approach to lesbianism. She cites Butler’s argument about the necessity to remain “permanently unclear what” the “sign” of lesbianism “signifies”. According to Jeffreys, this kind of argument exemplifies what she describes as a “radical uncertainty” about identifying as a lesbian (Ibid, p.91). Jeffreys contrasts this unfavourably with the argument advanced by radical lesbian feminists “in the 1970s” that lesbianism “pose(s) a challenge to male supremacy and its basic
institution of heterosexuality” (Ibid, p.ix). According to Jeffreys, this “radical uncertainty” about identifying as a lesbian comes at a point in history when members of many oppressed groups “are only just beginning to make space for themselves historically, culturally, and in the academy” (Ibid, p.91). Such uncertainty is not “politically useful” (Ibid).

In many obvious respects, the sexual politics of The Lesbian Heresy are far removed from those of The First Stone. Garner chastises feminists for having a “puritanical” attitude towards heterosexual sex. Garner, though, never uses the word ‘heterosexual’; homosexuality is conspicuously missing from her analysis. Garner reflects nostalgically on the ‘sexual revolution’; Jeffreys emphasises the male bias of this ‘revolution’. Equally, Jeffreys’ endorsement of lesbianism cannot be described as right-wing in any obvious sense. In recent years, an increased number of lesbians and gay men have aligned with the political right (see Goldstein, 2003), though right-wing opposition to these groups remains high.54

Nevertheless, Jeffreys’ criticisms of Butler’s work resemble those made by Garner and New Right commentators about the impact of progressive politics on the academy. Roz Kaveney suggests the similarity between the sexual politics of The Lesbian Heresy and reactionary right-wing politics:

(Jeffreys’) answer is a variant of the stab in the back theory that in the arena of power politics, right-wing nationalists come up with every time. We were robbed, they cry; victory was ours until a conspiracy came along and took it away from us. It was the intellectuals whoring after postmodernism, says Jeffreys …

(Kaveney, undated)

Garner and the New Right criticise academic feminists for over-emphasising male domination. Jeffreys criticises the academic feminism represented by theorists such as Butler because, she claims, this feminism under-emphasises gender hierarchy.

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54 In the lead-up to the 2004 Australian federal election, a campaigner for ‘Family First’ (a far-right minor party) was quoted as saying that lesbians “should be burnt at the stake” (Hawthorne, 2008). Three years earlier, the deeply conservative U.S. “televangelist” Jerry Falwell blamed lesbians and gay men for inciting the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Morgan, 2002, p.24).
In short, Jeffreys evokes a divide between “1970s” radical lesbian feminists and the “young” feminist students of the 1990s (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.83). According to Jeffreys, the “high ingestion” of poststructuralist theory undertaken by these students has meant that they “accept … that it is impossible to sidestep gender” (Ibid). These students “do not realise they are being insulting” by embracing role-playing and making statements such as: “Surely you have gender in your relationship” (Ibid). ‘Young’ feminist students of the 1990s have been underexposed to the feminist theory of the 1970s: “… that literature does not appear on their courses and is nowhere referenced” (Ibid, p.84). Jeffreys argues that whereas her “generation of women who grew up in the sixties” associated traditional gender roles with “a poor sense of self”, the young feminists of the 1990s have been given theoretical justification to have fun with these gender roles (Ibid, p.88).

The maternal attitude that Jeffreys adopts in these passages should seem familiar. Recall the way in which Garner cast herself as the feminist ‘mother’ who watched helplessly as her feminist ‘daughters’ embarked a political path that was very different to her own. Robert Reynolds describes Jeffreys’ argument as that of a “wounded and narcissistic mother: ‘You turned out to be not as I imagined. You dared to be different’” (Reynolds, 1994, p.143). According to Reynolds, Jeffreys portrays the efforts of young lesbians “to pursue desires of pleasure and freedom within changing and complex social structures” as “acts of duplicity, or worse, treachery” against the broader lesbian and feminist community (Ibid). Elsewhere, Reynolds accuses Jeffreys of relying too heavily on lesbian feminist theory from the “softly lit era” of the 1970s (Reynolds, 2003, p.43).

Further, in evoking this sense of a mother-daughter feminist conflict, I argue that Jeffreys relies on a romanticised perspective of feminist and lesbian history. She approvingly quotes American lesbian theorist Bonnie Zimmerman that the 1970s was a period in which lesbian feminists “felt ‘united in the warm glow of “sisterhood’”” (cited in Jeffreys, 1993a, p.153). The 1970s was indeed a decade in which women “offered new and more emphatic challenges to ‘the patriarchy’” (Arrow and Spongberg, 2007, p.160). Many of these women had been “silenced and marginalised” by the “male-dominated politics of the left” (Ibid). The emergence of radical lesbian feminism during the 1970s was well-received by many lesbian feminists. These lesbian feminists were finally able to
organise exclusively with other lesbian feminists, and without being subject to the hostility they had encountered in the women’s or gay liberation movements (see Thompson, 1985).\textsuperscript{55}

Yet, as Kimberly O’Sullivan acknowledges: “Within a shared identity as lesbians, women can drastically differ from each other in sexual attitude and sexual practice” (O’Sullivan, 1997, p.114). O’Sullivan cites disagreements amongst lesbians about issues such as penetrative sex. These disagreements took place in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s and into the 1990s (Ibid, pp.117-8). Reynolds argues that The Lesbian Heresy’s “nostalgia for an imagined past may fan the remaining embers of Jeffreys’ lesbian feminist community, but it does little to further the understanding of how contemporary lesbian subjectivities are constituted” (Reynolds, 1994, p.143). Reynolds concurs with U.S. feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin that Jeffreys appears to be pining for “Paradise Lost” (Ibid; Rubin and Butler, 1994, p.75).

Also, by holding Butler accountable for a particularly dominant and politically defeatist strand of academic feminism, I argue that Jeffreys misreads this work. According to Jeffreys, gender performativity entails a simple act of donning “heterosexualised” gender roles. However, as Jagose points out, “performativity is not something a subject does”, but is rather “a process through which that subject is constituted” (Jagose, 1996, p.87; my emphasis). Contrary to what Jeffreys might suggest (or hope for), “empowerment is not what performativity promises” (Ibid). Butler corrects this misreading of her work in her 1993 book Bodies that Matter, when she denies that she

… thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides on its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start …(S)uch a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject – humanist – at the center of a project

\textsuperscript{55} In the 1960s and 1970s, “Marxism was the dominant paradigm” in the political left (Rubin and Butler, 1994, p.63) Yet, as many activists discovered, Marxist theory had its limitations when trying to fully explain the oppression of women, gays and lesbians (Ibid; and see also Hennessy, 2000).
whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion.
(Butler, 1993a, p.x)

Thus, Butler **concurs** with Jeffreys in arguing that clothes do not “maketh the woman” (Weston, 1993). Butler has also responded to those critics who have accused her of suggesting that drag is inherently subversive. Her contention is “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalisation and reidealisation of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (Butler, 1993a, p.125). Instead, Butler argues that “drag … reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and … one opposes” (Ibid). In a specific reference to heterosexuality, Butler argues that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Ibid). In other words, drag highlights the constructed nature of heterosexual identities.

**Reviewing the “Politics” of Sexuality**

Critics of *The Lesbian Heresy* have rightly taken issue with the way Jeffreys polarises certain feminist perspectives and misreads Butler. 56 Nevertheless, some of these critics have – perhaps unwittingly - given support to Jeffreys’ argument that the study of sexuality is becoming depoliticised. They have, I argue, concurred with Jeffreys that “politics” is a short-hand for radical lesbian feminism, and that other approaches to sex and gender are apolitical or beyond political analysis. I will now consider some of these remarks about the “politics” of *The Lesbian Heresy*, and compare them with Jeffreys’ own remarks about what does and does not constitute “politics”.

In her review, Halberstam concurs with Jeffrey’s contention that those who politically analyse sexuality are likely to be labelled moralistic. According to Halberstam, “Jeffreys is … right”, and this is because “the accusation of moralism is reserved for the

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56 This does not include critics such as Denise Thompson (1995) and Phoebe Thorndyke (1993), who are mainly supportive of Jeffreys’ political position.
politically inflected discussion of sexual issues …” (Halberstam, 1995). In her creative review of *The Lesbian Heresy*, author Kathleen Fallon asks rhetorically: “Surely one shouldn’t have to hang on to one’s politics and sexuality with both hands and one’s eyes closed to remain true to oneself and one’s principles?” (Fallon, 1993, p.26). Fallon refers dismissively to *The Lesbian Heresy*’s author as “Ms Put-up-or-shut-up Personal-is-Political Jeffreys” (Ibid).

Perhaps unwittingly, these critics concur with Jeffreys that the study of sex and gender is only “political” or even “feminist” when it is conducted from a radical lesbian feminist perspective. Jeffreys advances this suggestion in passages such as the following:

> … I think it is useful to make a distinction between lesbian feminists and lesbians who are also feminists. In lesbian feminist philosophy the words ‘lesbian’ and ‘feminist’ are integral to each other, the lesbianism is feminist and the feminism is lesbian … Thus the feminist understanding that the personal is political means that all aspects of lesbian life will be examined to see how they fit the project. (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.xi)

The “feminism” to which Jeffreys refers is radical feminism. Jeffreys concedes that there are lesbians who partake in (say) S/M and who may not “reject feminism” (Ibid). Yet, she argues that these women cannot identify as ‘lesbian feminists’ or as ‘political lesbians’ (Ibid). The “political project” of these women is clearly antithetical to Jeffreys’ own “political project”. Hence, Jeffreys argues, these women can most accurately be described as “lesbians who are also feminists” (Ibid). The terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘feminist’ are mutually exclusive here, not coextensive.

As I pointed out in Chapter One, using the term ‘political’ as a term of derision is not new. Such usage has long appeared in New Right critiques of the academy. It certainly seems unlikely that theorists such as Reynolds and Halberstam would not see

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57 I thank Professor Halberstam for kindly providing me with a copy of her review of *The Lesbian Heresy* when my efforts to locate this piece were beginning to prove unsuccessful.

58 Fallon’s review is framed as a series of responses to *The Lesbian Heresy* by a collection of lesbian characters. All of these characters appear to be a variation on Fallon herself. The fragmented and intertextual style of this review resembles the literary style of Fallon’s novel *Working Hot* (1989).
their own work as being ‘political’. Equally, it appears unlikely that Jeffreys would consider any form of sexual identity or expression to be apolitical, even if they do not align well with the feminism she practises. Thus, I argue that the terms ‘politics’ and ‘political’ are being used in this context to describe political differences.

Rather than continue to describe these differences, I will argue that *The Lesbian Heresy* provides an opportunity to work towards a more nuanced analysis and synthesis of the various feminist perspectives on the issue of heterosexuality. This analysis/synthesis will be based around the question: What common features do these perspectives share, and in what ways do they differ? I am reminded here of Fran Martin’s warning about polarising different perspectives on sexuality. This warning is made during an interview about ‘sexuality studies’ at Melbourne University, though it has application beyond this institution. Martin describes the tendency of some students to “try and adjudicate between ‘the lesbian feminist approach’ to xxx and ‘the queer approach’” (cited in Marshall, 2005, p.123):

… this setting up of clearly demarcated ‘camps’ tends toward a kind of crude intellectual reductionism. I would prefer an environment in which there was less overdetermination of the field; where students could somehow encounter a range of different approaches without feeling compelled to ‘take sides’ prematurely, or even to concatenate the material into these predetermined ‘sides’ … Perhaps a starting point might be to try the heuristic exercise of asking: what do our approaches to the study of sexuality share in common – historically, institutionally, ethically, intellectually, politically – before zeroing in on the real ways in which they also differ. (cited in Ibid, pp.123-4)

As Martin acknowledges, there are “real differences and founding assumptions” between feminist theorists of sexuality, and these are not easy (or even possible) to overcome

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59 The interviewer, Daniel Marshall, states at one point that there have been “significant political differences … over the teaching of sexuality” at Melbourne University. Martin responds: “Just to make it explicit, I think you’re referring to differences between the radical/cultural feminist approach taken by Sheila Jeffreys, which often gets glossed as ‘lesbian feminism’, and the broadly poststructuralist approaches taken by Annamarie (Jagose), Steven (Angelides) and others, which often get glossed as ‘queer theory’” (cited in Ibid).
(cited in Ibid, p.124). Nevertheless, such a “heuristic exercise” will at least avoid dividing different strands of feminism into “clearly demarcated ‘camps’”. In her review, Kaveney argues that Jeffreys’ “beliefs close off debate and dialogue” (Kaveney, undated). I argue that Jeffreys and her critics have taken very different “sides” and refused to engage in any kind of meaningful “dialogue” with each other. For most part, they have not (collectively or separately) explored the ways in which their different perspectives on sexuality differ from and – in some cases - actually resemble one another.

In the final section of this chapter, I put in motion a “dialogue” of sorts between these strands of feminism when I investigate whether heterosexuality is always underpinned by a gender hierarchy or whether heterosexuality can work within feminist terms. I ask whether heterosexual sex is always oppressive to women, and whether marriage always needs to follow a traditional/conservative path. In this section, I also ask whether gender roles (however these may be defined) are always symptomatic of inequality between the sexes. This latter question is pertinent to analyses of all relationships, be they heterosexual, lesbian, gay male, bisexual or ‘queer’.

There are many issues raised in *The Lesbian Heresy* that I do not discuss at length or at all. I only briefly mention the issue of transsexualism. I do not discuss pornography and S/M in this chapter, though both will be explored in the chapters that follow. I do not discuss drag. I do not address Jeffreys’ argument that poststructuralism and the “lesbian sex industry” have been unduly influenced by gay men. This argument has been disputed by critics who have accused her of having an anti-gay male animus (Marshall, 2003; Reynolds, 1994 and 2003). Gay men’s relationship with feminism has been discussed at length elsewhere, and remains an important area of scholarly inquiry (Jensen, 1997; Nestle and Preston, 1994).

Also, I do not mention the issue of prostitution. This omission may seem striking, given the controversy Jeffreys has provoked with her argument that female prostitutes are the most subjugated of all women (Bindel, 2008). Jeffreys first advanced this argument in 1997’s *The Idea of Prostitution*, and it is the subject of her most recent book, *The Industrial Vagina* (2009). Prostitution is only briefly mentioned in *The Lesbian Heresy*. When it is mentioned, prostitution – and namely lesbian prostitution – is viewed as yet another example of lesbian sexuality being commodified.
Heterosexuality and Lesbian Utopianism

The accusation that *The Lesbian Heresy* is utopian was made by several critics of the text. For example, Jaana Salonen argues that, in portraying “subversive power (as) the choice of political lesbianism”, Jeffreys positions “lesbianism outside the structures of language, desire and culture” (Salonen, 1995, p.197). Roz Kaveney is even blunter when she accuses Jeffreys of being “besotted with utopianism” (Kaveney, undated). Robert Reynolds argues that *The Lesbian Heresy* produces “utopian solutions” to “sex class warfare” that “exist outside and above the structure of historical and contemporary gender relations” (Reynolds, 1994, p.138).

Feminism has always been utopian to the extent that it “breaks rules and confronts boundaries” and “creates new conceptual and political space” (Sargisson, 2000, p.4). Radical lesbian feminism is certainly one of the most utopian strands of feminism. This strand of feminism has (perhaps more so than others) recognised the political advantages of women working with, and loving one another. Radical lesbian feminists have challenged the political invisibility of women generally, and lesbians more specifically. Radical lesbian feminists have also challenged stereotypes of lesbianism as a “sexual preference”, a “lifestyle” or a form of sickness (Seidman, 1998, p.283).

Nevertheless, there are significant risks with portraying lesbianism as the ultimate key to women’s liberation. According to Annamarie Jagose, portraying lesbianism in this way make power seem “prohibitive” rather than being “dispersed across a multiplicity of locations whose effects are sometimes concentrated, sometimes contradictory; and … generated at the microlevel by and on the very bodies once thought of as ‘powerless’” (Jagose, 1994, p.5). Jagose argues that the “tendency” to figure lesbianism as existing “outside” these “frameworks” of power “essentialises that category as transgressive or subversive” (Ibid). This is even despite the fact that radical lesbian feminists such as Jeffreys have claimed to endorse social constructionism (Jeffreys, 1993a, pp.93-4).60

Furthermore, Jagose argues that portraying lesbianism as utopian actually goes some way to contradicting the activist slogan “Lesbians are Everywhere” (Jagose, 1994, p.2). Jagose contends: “Perhaps the most common explanation for the lesbian’s continued

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60 For an overview of how ‘essentialism’ has been understood in feminist and sexuality studies, see Fuss (1989).
invisibility has been insofar as she disrupts culturally dominant understandings of gender and sexuality, the lesbian is not able to be thought” (Ibid). According to this explanation, the lesbian is not simply ‘other’; she is practically nonexistent. Or, as Jagose puts it: “Lesbians are Elsewhere” (Ibid, p.1).

Jagose’ argument is supported by Jeffreys’ model of the ideal radical lesbian feminist. This lesbian is perhaps the most ‘genuine’ lesbian and the most politically liberated woman in existence. Radical lesbian feminists are apparently diverse: their numbers have included “working-class lesbians, black lesbians, ethnic minority lesbians and indigenous lesbians” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.x). That said, however, the ideal radical lesbian feminist is defined almost exclusively by what she is not. According to The Lesbian Heresy, the radical lesbian feminist is a woman who rejects all markers of ‘gender’. She practises separatism and refuses to align politically with gay men. She appears not to partake in any sexual activity. The radical lesbian feminist channels all her energy into other women, though she apparently has little time for women (including other lesbians) whose politics are not the same as her own.

Perhaps wary that her analysis will be regarded as utopian and essentialist, Jeffreys argues that lesbianism is not immune to what she calls “heterosexual desire”. Jeffreys uses the term “heterosexual desire” to describe “the eroticised power difference which originates in heterorelations but can also exist in same sex unions” (Ibid, p.20). In this analysis, heterosexuality does not so much refer to sexed bodies as it does to a desire for traditional gender roles (Jeffreys, 1996a). Jeffreys argues that butch-femme role-playing is one example of how lesbians can adopt “heterosexual genders” (Ibid).

Jeffreys contrasts her model of “heterosexual desire” with what she calls “homosexual desire”. “Homosexual desire” is defined as “the eroticising of sameness and mutuality” and suggests that it can be practised by everyone – including homosexuals (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.120). According to Jeffreys, achieving “homosexual desire” is the “most important part of (women’s) struggle for liberation” (Jeffreys, 1990, p.313). However, Jeffreys suggests that “homosexual desire” might – at least “in theory” – “be easier to achieve in same-sex relationships where the institutionalised power difference between the sexes does not intrude” (Jeffreys, 1996a, p.78). Not all same-sex attracted
individuals or ‘sexual rebels’ would be able to practise “homosexual desire”. Halberstam argues:

Jeffreys’ chosen lesbians do not include butches and femmes (role players), sadomasochists, producers and consumers of pornography, transsexuals or transvestites, fetishists, gay men, masculine women of any kind, sex workers and sex therapists … (Halberstam, 1995)

“Homosexual desire” would thus seem most easy to achieve amongst lesbians, although Kaveney casts a doubt on this:

(Jeffreys) catalogues deadly sins – in the 80s lesbians started playing with roles or using toys and pornography; they went to therapists who had decided all this was OK and decided that lesbianism was often innate rather than a choice of existential virtue; they read Foucault and hung around in low bars and looked at the virtue of gay male culture. (Kaveney, undated)

Thus, the “homosexual desire” which is so “important” for women’s liberation only seems achievable amongst radical lesbian feminists. For these women, there are no apparent “institutionalised power differences”. Yet even then, the radical lesbian feminist idealised by Jeffreys seems to be less a ‘real-life’ woman than a mass of oppositions.

A more nuanced analysis of heterosexuality can be created by looking firstly at gender roles. Most feminists would concur that these roles have been socially constructed and that historically they have been integral to, and a by-product of, what Adrienne Rich famously termed “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1984). Butler complicates this argument in an analysis of lesbian butch-femme role-playing:

The idea that butch and femme are in some sense “replicas” or “copies” of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. (Butler, 1990b, p.168)
Butch-femme lesbians do not always see themselves as enacting “original or natural identities” – in this case, traditional male and female gender roles (Ibid). Butler argues that it is the ability of these lesbians to “question … these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance” (Ibid).

To illustrate my point, I will contrast Jeffreys’ argument about gender roles with the arguments of lesbian feminists who have consciously adopted these roles. Jeffreys defines “femininity” as comprising behaviour that “shows deference. Girls and women are expected to take up little space, sit with legs crossed and arms by their sides, keep their eyes lowered, speak only when spoken to” (Jeffreys, 1996a, p.76). Jeffreys argues that “the fashion and beauty industries cause women to do grave damage to their bodies and even starve themselves to death through eating disorders” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.62). As a result, lesbians have tended to reject traditionally feminine apparel in favour of “T-shirts and jeans” and “short hair” (Ibid, p.77).

Jeffreys’ remarks about the social expectations placed upon women’s behaviour and physical appearance are undeniable. As Jeffreys has argued elsewhere, traditional femininity has functioned as what Butler might term an “instrument of regulatory regimes” (see Jeffreys, 2005). Equally, however, Jeffreys uses femininity – or a certain understanding of what femininity might entail - in a “regulatory” way. Jeffreys contests the argument that “there was no such a thing as ‘what a lesbian looked like’” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.77). She suggests that the androgynous “T-shirt and jeans” lesbian look is the definitive lesbian look. This effectively renders femme lesbians as lesbians who are “passing’ to gain male privilege” (Ibid). Barbara Creed recalls how, in “debates that raged in Melbourne in the mid-1970s”, lesbians who refused to discard all signifiers of femininity were often referred to as “heterosexual lesbians’, an interesting concept that constructs as a lesbian as an impossibility” (Creed, 1995, p.102). Similarly, Lynda Hart has argued that “the femme (lesbian) is constantly at risk” of vanishing into “the optical field occupied by the heterosexual woman” (Hart, 1998b, p.218). Once again, “lesbians are elsewhere”.

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61 The terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ are not commonly used in most Western gay male communities. There is, however, gender-role playing amongst gay men. Witness the popularity of the gay male ‘bear’ or the ‘scene queen’. In anal sex, partners sometimes take the roles of ‘top’ and ‘bottom’, with the ‘bottom’ being the recipient of penetration (see Underwood, 2003).
Moreover, it is unclear what does or does not count as a signifier of femininity, or that discarding all such signifiers will lead to personal or political liberation. Fallon makes this point (albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner) when she asks: “… how high a heel, how long a hair, do you feel is allowable before your woman slides inadvertently into collaboration with the enemy, with the brutal heterosexual phallocracy, condoning rape, incest, domestic violence … ?” (Fallon, 1993, p.25). For the U.S. scholar Lisa Walker, wearing what may be regarded as traditionally feminine attire have given her a sense of personal satisfaction that was not achieved by donning “the ubiquitous flannel-shirts-and-jeans lesbian drag” (Walker, 2001, p.184). This is even despite the reactions that her physical appearance has induced in lesbians who have adopted “the sexual style “butch”” (Ibid). These reactions range from suspicion to a complete non-recognition of Walker’s lesbian identity.

The argument that women adopt “femininity” to gain a sense of “privilege” is not dissimilar to the argument “that it is only social and political factors that keep most women ‘safely’ heterosexual” (Mills, 1992, p.46). This kind of argument is useful to the extent it suggests that heterosexuality is a “political construct” (to use Jeffreys’ term) and not “natural” or beyond political analysis. Nevertheless, this argument is also premised on the assumption that heterosexual women are dupes to patriarchal pressure; and that only lesbians have been strong enough to resist this pressure. This assumption is problematic. Lynne Segal, for example, denounces Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (editors of the Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader) for overemphasising the “guilt” felt by their heterosexual feminist contributors and for portraying these women as “victims” (Segal, 1994, p.215). Stereotyping heterosexual feminists in this way may ostensibly have the “intention of opening up spaces for feminist theorizing and exploration of heterosexuality”, but such stereotypes are in fact “dedicated … to closing them down” (Ibid, p.216).

Similar problems arise with Jeffreys’ understanding of ‘masculinity’. For Jeffreys, ‘masculinity’ is “learnt behaviour, which demonstrates dominance and maintains a man’s place in the ruling class” (Jeffreys, 1996a, p.76). This definition is certainly not invalid, but is difficult to apply to women who may identify themselves and/or be identified by others as ‘masculine’. These include lesbians who have rejected feminine signifiers for
political reasons, as well as lesbians who have transitioned to male identities (Halberstam, 1998). I include in the latter group female-to-male transsexuals, a group that Jeffreys also sees as adopting traditional gender roles – although in a far more extreme way than butch-femme lesbians (see Jeffreys, 1996a).62 Halberstam criticises Jeffreys for aligning these women with “the male ruling class” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.66).

Anyone who has ever experienced violence, malice, exclusion or discomfort on account of their inability to conform to narrow standards of gender propriety will know that butch women, masculine women in this world are hardly part of the “male ruling class”. (Halberstam, 1995)

Jeffreys herself concurs with the latter statement when she writes that “lesbians who ‘look like lesbians’, and their attackers do know what that means, are at risk” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.77). In other words, women who eschew a traditionally feminine appearance face discrimination and physical danger, regardless of whether or not they identify as ‘butch’ or ‘masculine’.

Jeffreys has acknowledged that gender is not the only factor which can lead to inequality in a relationship. She argues that “in same sex relationships, where another gender is absent, otherness can be reintroduced through differences of age, race, class” (Jeffreys, 1990, p.301). Jeffreys’ answer to this predicament is to “eroticise sameness” (Ibid, p.315). Jeffreys suggests that this can be done by “learn(ing) from feminists and lesbians in our history and bec(oming) proud of what distinguishes lesbian experience from male-supremacist culture” (Ibid). There is again a suggestion that “lesbian experience” represents the only salvation from sexual inequality. Jeffreys also suggests that ‘difference’ will always lead to an abuse of power in a relationship. Reynolds highlights this aspect of Jeffreys’ model of egalitarian desire when he suggests that it evidences a “fear of difference that verges upon terror” (Reynolds, 2003, p.43).

62 The argument that transsexuals are merely trying to adopt “heterosexualised genders” has been crucial to radical feminism (see Raymond, 1979). For more nuanced and sensitive perspectives on transsexual and transgender existence, see the essays in Stryker and Whittle (2006).
Conversely, I concur with Robyn Rowland that we need to question whether “sameness is necessary for equality” (Rowland, 1996, p.80; her emphasis). We need to ask how egalitarianism can be achieved even when differences (gender-related and otherwise) are present. Jeffreys argues for an emphasis on “equality and mutuality” (Jeffreys, 1990, p.315). Rowland expands on this argument in her contribution to Wilkinson and Kitzinger’s collection. Rowland argues that a “feminist heterosexual relationship” is one that would “include an equitable power distribution in terms of economic independence, where the woman does not engage in domestic, sexual and emotional servicing …” (Rowland, 1993, p.76). Furthermore, she argues that this “feminist heterosexual relationship would emphasise “trust, reciprocity, knowing each other” (Ibid). This kind of relationship does not “lock” a woman (heterosexual or otherwise) “into structures of oppression” (Kwok, 1995, p.141).

One “structure” which has commonly been understood by feminists and queer activists as being oppressive to women is marriage. Jeffreys describes the way in which “women were generally disappeared from history, scholarship, from the records as soon as they were married and lost their names” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.88). Catharine MacKinnon makes a similar point in her analysis of classic Marxist theory when she argues:

… the rise of private property, class divisions, women’s oppression, and the state “coincided with” and required each other, linking the exploitation of man by man in production and social control through the instrument of the state with the subordination of woman to man in monogamy and household drudgery.

(MacKinnon, 1989, p.22)

However, as Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim (2004) suggest in their article on same-sex marriage, the institution of marriage does not always need to follow traditional paths. As in unmarried relationships, one partner should not need to rely on their spouse for financial support or be required take the other partner’s surname. Marriage does not need to involve an unequal distribution of labour (domestic and otherwise), nor does it need to

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63 This includes Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). For a useful analysis of the heterosexism in classic Marxism, see Hennessy (2000, pp.37-73).
always entail monogamy. Jeffreys acknowledges that “monogamy and non-monogamy were debated with some heat” amongst feminists in the 1970s (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.xii). More research needs to be done on forms of non-monogamy, for example, ‘open’ relationships and relationships between more than two partners. To what extent do these relationships challenge patriarchally-defined sexuality?

We now turn to the question of whether sexual intercourse need always reproduce power imbalances. In the previous chapter, I cited the feminist argument that sexual violence is an important way in which men have exerted power over women both individually and as a social group. Jeffreys argues that patriarchal models of heterosexuality “for men (are) based upon eroticising the otherness of women, an otherness which is based upon a difference of power” (Jeffreys, 1990, pp.300-1). Theorists such as Andrea Dworkin (1987) have theorised sexual violence that takes place amongst heterosexual couples. Susan Hawthorne argues that male sexual abuse has become “quintessential form of torture used against lesbians” (Hawthorne, 2005/6, p.39). This abuse is

… a reminder that women – and hence lesbians – who step outside the patriarchal and heterosexual normative modes of behaviour will be punished. Lesbians epitomize the “other” in the Western philosophical tradition, and the “lesbian body” is very clearly a world of “otherness”. (Ibid, p.47)

The female body has (to use Dworkin’s words) been understood as an object of male “conquest”. The body that refuses this “conquest” – namely, the lesbian body – is the body that must be marked as ‘other’ and sometimes killed. Male bodies have been “used as battering rams, men’s hearts objectifying women, humiliating and violating women sexually” (Rowland, 1996, p.78).

Jeffreys argues that “the struggle for liberation does not necessarily require chastity”, though she points out that “(s)uch a strategy could only cause disbelief in a male-supremacist society in which sex has been made holy” (Jeffreys, 1990, p.315).

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64 One recent book that does address some of these questions is Lauren Rosewarne’s Cheating on the Sisterhood (2009).
Jeffreys contends that a truly egalitarian relationship will not be “recognised as ‘sex’” in the way that ‘sex’ is currently understood under male supremacy (Ibid). 65 This is due to factors that include the absence of penetration in much sexual activity amongst lesbians. 66 Similarly, Rowland argues that an equitable male-female relationship is one “in which sex or intercourse is not the primary way of relating” (Rowland, 1993, p.76). However, as Rowland also points out, “intercourse does take place which is not degrading. Penetration is not always rape” (Rowland, 1996, p.83). This point may seem obvious, yet it needs to be stated to provide a positive balance to the remarks about sexual violence that are cited above. Kwok concurs with Rowland when she argues that heterosexual sex “can be as playful of those boundaries that supposedly set apart two bodies, two sexes, two pleasures, two desires” (Kwok, 1995, p.137). This sexual activity is not, Kwok suggests, always characterised by “active and passive, subject and object” dichotomies (Ibid).

Outside the fabulations and fantasmagoria of ‘scientific’ or pornographic texts the hominid penis is anything but permanently erect, anything but endlessly ready for unencumbered sex, anything but triggered by the nearest passing female … (Segal, 1994, p.219).

The Sydney commentator Kath Albury argues that “… there is no automatic, intrinsic meaning in any particular sex act – even vaginal intercourse” (Albury, 2002, p.40). Albury argues that “(t)o define heterosexuality as simply penetrative sex and/or power play is to agree, in a sense, with the culturally dominant representations of heterosexuality” (Ibid).

Furthermore, Albury suggests that acknowledging how heterosexual sex can be pleasurable and non-oppressive for women and men means acknowledging that heterosexual sex and male sexual behaviour are “changeable” (Ibid, p.xxi). Sexual activity between a man and a woman does not need to reproduce “normalising

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65 A similar argument is made by Marilyn Frye in her essay ‘Lesbian “Sex”’ (1991).
66 Penetration between lesbians can be achieved through use of sex toys such as dildoes, though Jeffreys (perhaps unsurprisingly) suggests that such toys are quite literally the products of a male supremacist imagination (Ibid, pp.29-30).
stereotypes where Male = Active/Strong/Desiring, and Female = Passive/Weak/Desired” (Ibid). Andrea Dworkin herself concurred with this view. In her book *Intercourse* (1987), she argues: “Women have a vision of love that includes men as human too; and women want the human in men, including in the act of intercourse” (Dworkin, 1987, p. 151).

In advancing this argument, I am not suggesting that heterosexuality is necessarily ‘comparable to’ or ‘the same as’ homosexuality. The term ‘queer’ has been an immensely important rallying point for all those who want to assert that monogamous heterosexuality is not the only valuable form of sexuality. Nevertheless, applying the term ‘queer’ to heterosexuals can give heterosexuality the sense of ‘otherness’ commonly associated with homosexuality, but with none of the risks that same sex-attracted women and men face. Bonnie Zimmerman argues that “if you push it far, and far enough, queer takes over everybody, because everybody is in some ways outside the normal” (cited in Zimmerman and Sayer, 1995, p.39).

To illustrate Zimmerman’s point, consider Clyde Smith’s act of “coming out as a queer heterosexual” (Smith, 2000, p.60). Consider also Segal’s call for heterosexual feminists to “come out” and ask “How Dare You Assume What it Means to be Straight?” (Segal, 1994, p.261; her emphasis). The anti-homophobic and pro-feminist stances that Smith and Segal take are laudable. Nevertheless, through their use of the ‘coming out’ trope and the term ‘queer’, these writers gloss over the myriad differences between their heterosexual identities and those of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. Heather Brook sums up this glossing-over in an amusing hypothetical scenario in which she refers to Segal’s text: “‘Kids, honey, I’ve been living a lie and I want to be honest and share this with you – I’m a straight feminist’. The horror!” (Brook, 1996, p.43).

Jeffreys rightly argues that lesbians are all “rebels” to the extent that they have “continue(d) being lesbians in a lesbian hating world” (Jeffreys, 1993a, p.114). This was true in the 1970s, and remained true in the 1990s, when lesbians faced not only New Right-perpetuated homophobia, but also the increased use of lesbianism as a marketing tool par excellence. Jeffreys sees “(t)hose who expound lesbian feminist politics” as those

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67 Nevertheless, there is some validity in the U.S. journalist Gabriel Rotello’s argument that “(w)hen you’re trying to describe the community, and you have to list gays, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens, transsexuals (post-op and pre), it gets unwieldy. Queer says it all” (cited in Sullivan, 2003, p.44).
who pose the greatest challenge to “heteropatriarchy” (Ibid). Lesbians of other political persuasions have discussed their own, often quite different modes of resistance to this “heteropatriarchy” (see O'Sullivan, 1997; Walker, 2001).

I have argued that *The Lesbian Heresy* offers a variation of the argument that Garner advanced in *The First Stone*. Jeffreys argues that ‘young’ feminist students are being negatively influenced by the poststructuralist feminism that is evidenced in Butler’s work and are being shielded from radical lesbian feminism. As a result, these women have come to accept that gender is fun and ‘performative’ rather than something which must be eradicated because it is a symptom of women’s oppression. I argue that, in advancing this argument, Jeffreys reproduces a generational conflict between feminists. Her suggestion that “1990s” academic feminism was apolitical is ironically – and unwittingly - given support by her critics. I argue that a more politically and intellectually astute move is to engage with both radical lesbian feminist and ‘poststructuralist’ insights on heterosexuality. By doing this, we can avoid evoking a sense of factional and generational warfare between feminists. We can also avoid portraying heterosexual women as patriarchal dupes. The political subversiveness of lesbianism is not overlooked here, and nor is lesbianism rendered as being impossible and “elsewhere”.

Chapter Four

**Bad Girls, The Media and Catharine Lumby’s ‘Sex Wars’**

*Pornography is sexual terrorism*
(Hawthorne, 1991, p.25)

*I’m breaking all the rules I didn’t make*
*(Express yourself, don’t repress yourself)*
(Madonna, ‘Human Nature’)

*Bad Girls* is significant in the context of this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, Lumby endorses a critical approach to sexually explicit media imagery that engages a diversity of feminist (including ‘academic feminist’) perspectives. Secondly, she cautions against an alliance between feminists and the New Right. However, I argue that a political paradox becomes apparent in Lumby’s readings of sexually explicit media imagery. Lumby implies that these readings will resonate most strongly with the media-savvy feminists of the 1990s. Conversely, she suggests that feminist critics of this imagery are ‘pro-censorship’ and that they reproduce traditional gender stereotypes. I argue that Lumby’s bias towards her own political perspective evidences the kind of individualism exhibited by Helen Garner and Rene Denfeld. Moreover, the ‘pro-/anti-censorship’ feminist positions that Lumby evokes have been lifted largely from U.S. feminist debates about pornography. I argue that in evoking these polarised positions, Lumby actually creates her own ‘sex wars’ in an Australian context.

**Pornography and the Culture Wars**

Pornography has been the topic of extensive debate during the culture wars. Feminist debates on this issue have been variously referred to as the ‘sex wars’ and ‘porn wars’ (Duggan and Hunter, 1995). Defining ‘pornography’ can be a difficult task, as I will discuss at length in Chapter Five. At this point, it is useful to get a sense of how this term has been used:
The category of pornography has been defined in terms of content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts), lack thereof (materials without any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value), intention (texts intended to arouse their consumers) and effect (texts arousing their consumers). (Paasonen et al, 2007, p.1)

The best-known definitions of pornography, at least in a contemporary sense, are those that emphasise “sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts” and the ability to “arouse … consumers”.

Feminist debates on the topic of pornography arose in the late 1970s and gained impetus during 1980s and early 1990s in America and Britain. They emerged at a time in which ‘images of women’ criticism was becoming popular amongst literary and visual culture theorists (Moi, 1985, p.42).68 Some feminists questioned what “positive or realistic images” of women might resemble (Grace and Stephen, 1994, p.80). Film scholars such as Laura Mulvey (1989) highlighted the way in which women in popular culture have been sexually objectified to appease a powerful male gaze. This emphasis on female sexual objectification and the male gaze appears constantly in feminist debates about pornography.

The pornography debates that I have just mentioned have commonly been framed as conflicts between two rigidly defined ‘groups’. The first ‘group’ comprises anti-pornography feminists, the best-known of whom are Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. In 1983, Dworkin and MacKinnon designed an ordinance to “allow women to civilly sue those who hurt us through pornography by trafficking in it, coercing people into it, forcing it on people, and assaulting people directly because of a specific piece of it” (Dworkin, 1988, p.272). Dworkin argued that, in pornography, women are “dehumanized as sexual objects … and commodities”, “reduced to (body) parts” (Dworkin, 1981, p.xxxxiii). According to MacKinnon, “(m)en treat women as whom they see women as being – and pornography constructs who that is” (MacKinnon, 1989, p.197). Dworkin and Mackinnon were theorising in America. In the U.K., Sheila Jeffreys

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68 The earliest volume of ‘images of women’ criticism was Susan Koppelman Cornillon’s Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives (1972).

The second ‘group’ of feminists to partake in these debates have been variously labelled (sometimes by themselves, sometimes by other critics) as ‘pro-sex’, ‘sex-positive’, ‘anti-censorship’ and ‘sex-radical’. As U.S. scholar Carole S. Vance argues, “(b)eing a sex radical … is less a matter of what you do, and more a matter of what you are willing to think, question and entertain” (Vance, 1992, p.23). For Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, pornography is “full of multiple, contradictory, layered and highly contextual meanings” (Duggan and Hunter, 1995, p.7). Duggan and Hunter suggest that women can “appropriate even apparently misogynistic images, transforming them for their own explorations of prohibited sexual terrains” (Ibid). Some critics have argued that anti-pornography feminists actually reproduce the stereotypes that “men are lustful” and “violent” while women are “loving” and “peaceful” (Webster, 1981, p.51). Anti-pornography feminists have also been accused of reproducing the myth that “only bad girls like sex” and that “good girls” are “non-sexual women” (Ibid, pp.50 and 51). Paula Webster contends that if feminists “can switch our focus from men’s pleasure to our own, then we have the potential of creating the discourse that will challenge” these stereotypes (Ibid, p.51).

In Australia, feminist debates about pornography took shape during the 1980s and 1990s. However, and this is a point I will expand on later in the chapter, these debates appear to have been less hostile and polarised than those that took place in America or Britain. Some Australian feminists have opposed pornography on the grounds that it supposedly eroticises woman-hatred (Hawthorne, 1991; Scutt, 1991). The 1980s saw the emergence of groups such as Women Against Violence and Exploitation which were “strongly influenced” by the work of U.S. commentators such as Dworkin (Sullivan, 1997, p.166). Other feminists have been more ambivalent on the topic (Garner, 1981; Grosz, 1981). Feminists such as Kimberly O’Sullivan (1997) have held a more or less celebratory approach towards pornography, as well as sexually explicit cultural production in general.

In mid-1990s Australia, the kind of sexually permissive stance taken by feminists such as O’Sullivan found a reasonably prominent expression in a small selection of
topical and scholarly feminist texts. *Bad Girls* is one of these, as is Jill Julius Matthews’ edited collection *Sex in Public*. Matthews’ collection featured O’Sullivan’s essay on lesbians and/in the sex industry (I quoted from this essay in the previous chapter), and was also published in 1997. For Mary Spongberg, *Sex in Public* “represent(ed) the shifting modalities shaping sexual politics in the 1990s” (Spongberg, 1997, p.341).

Matthews argues that texts such as hers aimed to combat “the negativity and pessimism” which she sees characterising “the dominant understanding about sex within feminism” in Australia (Matthews, 1997, p. xiii). In her review of *Bad Girls*, Marilyn Lake argues that this “dominant understanding” was based around the “1970s discourse on women as exploited ‘sex objects’” (Lake, 1997, p.341). This reads like a variation on commentaries about the increasingly sex-negative nature of American feminism during the 1980s.

These commentaries include Carole S. Vance’s 1984 essay in which she argued that “feminist analysis runs the risk of overemphasising sexual danger” (Vance, 1992, p.4). These commentaries also include Webster’s 1981 article on pornography. In this article, Webster argued that U.S. feminism was becoming “anti-sex” (Webster, 1981, p.49).

*Bad Girls* is framed foremost as an intervention into feminist debates about pornography. Lumby focuses primarily on media imagery. She does, however, devote an entire chapter to feminist debates about pornography, and these debates are referenced throughout her text. In the context of this thesis, *Bad Girls* offers a useful entry point into exploring feminist debates not just about pornography, but about sexually explicit representations more generally. The representations that Lumby addresses are primarily visual; the representations I will discuss in the two following chapters are literary. The term ‘sexually explicit’ is historically and culturally contingent; I use it very loosely to describe material that foregrounds sexual activity. I will use the term ‘sexualised’ to refer to “the act of giving someone or something a sexual character” (Rush and La Nauze, 2006, p.1). The extension of this term is ‘sexualisation’, for example, the ‘sexualisation of culture’.

**Bad Girls: Beyond Polarised Positions and Generational Conflicts?**

In *Bad Girls*, Lumby argues that Meaghan Morris “has a keen sense of the diffuse networks which link academic theory, popular debate and everyday life” (Lumby, 1997a,
Lumby could also be describing herself. Since the mid-1990s – and especially since the publication of *Bad Girls* - she has constructed a public profile within Australia as an academic feminist media commentator. I mention this not to condemn or praise Lumby, but because I consider that her professional and public identity cannot be separated from the content of *Bad Girls*. Lumby has researched extensively in the fields of feminist media and cultural studies. *Bad Girls* is a prime example of the aim that underpins much of Lumby’s work: to demonstrate the relevance of feminist media and cultural studies to audiences ‘within’ and ‘outside’ the academy.

Witness the publicity campaign for *Bad Girls*. This campaign is described in the following (albeit somewhat laudatory) manner by McKenzie Wark in his book *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace*, and appears in a section entitled “Catherine Lumby’s Appearances” (Wark, 1999, pp.69-77)

(Lumby) appears on ABC Radio National’s *Late Night Live* with Phillip Adams, voicing her ideas, but she also decorates Mikey Robins’ panel on the ABC TV comedy game show *Good News Week*. The *Australian* critiques her at great length, then she pops up in black bra and panties in the music magazine *Juice*. Exquisitely photographed in *Vogue*, she wisecracks her way through the Foxtel comedy panel show *Mouthing Off*. (Ibid, p.69)

These “appearances” tie in firstly, and most broadly, with Lumby’s argument that “the public sphere is inseparable from the media sphere” (Lumby, 2004, p.217). In her book *Gotcha* (1999), Lumby argues:

The intensity and scope of media coverage today is unprecedented. Driven by technological advances, increased competition, and globalisation, the contemporary mass media is radically altering our understanding of both public and private life. (Lumby, 1999, p.xi)

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Prior to the publication of *Bad Girls*, Lumby provided media commentary on sex and gender-related issues. For example, in a 1995 magazine article on the issue of sexual harassment, Lumby is quoted as making statements such as: “Sexual harassment is about power – but then power is also about sex” (cited in Deitz, 1995, p.56).
In this increasingly mediatised public sphere, “the line between the private and the public has become increasingly blurred” (Ibid). Also, by the 1990s, the line between the media and the public sphere had become blurred in ways that would have been unimaginable in prior decades.

Secondly, “Catharine Lumby’s appearances” relate to her argument that academics should act as public/media intellectuals. In her 2004 essay ‘Outside In: Journalists and Academics in the Public Sphere’, Lumby suggests that the “boundaries between academic and public debate” should be collapsed or at least made unclear (Ibid, p.201). According to Lumby, these “boundaries” have been reinforced through accusations of “political correctness” that have been directed at academics by the New Right (Ibid, p.215). Also, Lumby argues that academics are “always speaking with a specialist history of ideas and methods in mind” (Ibid, p.203). They are “(q)uestioning the apparently unquestionable, discomfiting people by doubting common-sense propositions”, and “this makes it easy for journalists to make scholars look wacky, pretentious or just plain silly” (Ibid). According to Lumby, academics need to start “engaging with the media” and, to do this, they need to “understand the structuring elements of media discourse and use them” (Ibid, p.217). These are discourses that she claims to have developed an understanding of through her academic research, as well as through her frequent media appearances and her past employment as a journalist.

Lumby’s arguments about academics, the media and the public sphere have their limitations. New Right attacks against a politicised academy will not necessarily disappear when an academic learns to espouse “media discourse”. There are many problems with the assumption that the media offers “a democratic system of mass communication” (McGuigan, 1998, p.91). Lumby argues:

… the past few decades have seen an overwhelming democratisation of our media – a diversification not only of voices, but of ways of speaking about personal, social and political life … the contemporary media sphere constitutes a highly diverse and inclusive forum in which a host of important social issues once deemed apolitical, trivial or personal are now being aired. (Lumby, 1999, p.xiii)
This argument echoes Jurgen Habermas’ understanding of the public sphere as a space where “people (can) freely communicate and debate ideas in a rational, equitable fashion” (Lewis, 2004, p.120; and see Habermas, 1989). Lumby’s argument has its truths; the fact that a range of feminists (including Lumby) have received media attention in Australia in recent decades is evidence of this. To portray the media as an entirely democratic and non-hierarchical sphere is, however, misleading. As I will argue later in the chapter, Lumby’s appearances in the Australian media as authority figure on sex and representation has depended largely on her career as an academic.

At this point, though, I will focus on what I perceive to be the main strength of Lumby’s argument. This strength lies in her ability to demonstrate that academic theory – and particularly ‘academic feminist’ theory – has relevance within and outside the boundaries (however one wishes to measure these) of the academy. Bad Girls can already be distinguished from The First Stone and The Lesbian Heresy, both of which are profoundly anti-academic. Lumby describes her text as “a crossover book … it roams across traditional boundaries between academic theory, reportage and journalistic polemic” (Lumby, 1997a, p.xxviii). Several critics have concurred with this assessment. Meaghan Morris, for example, has praised Bad Girls for challenging the “sad ‘theory’/policy stand-off in cultural debate” (cited in Mead and Morris, 1997, p.250). For Morris, Lumby’s text will be amongst “the first of many” books that are “lively, serious, beautifully written … for general readers with brains (cited in Ibid; her emphasis). Morris praises Bad Girls in an interview with Jenna Mead. Significantly, this interview was published in Bodyjamming, which was one of the book-length responses to The First Stone.

Bad Girls is one of numerous texts published in Australia since the late 1990s that have argued for the relevance of academic research in the broader public sphere. Other such texts include Australian Literature and the Public Sphere (1999), The Ideas Market (2004), Creating Value (2006) and Literary Activists (2009). These books demonstrate vehement opposition to the dual impact of neoliberalism and the New Right upon the university, and particularly the humanities. The contributors to these books argue that humanities scholars are not ideologues whose discourse is useful only to an elite coterie. These scholars do have something important to say about contemporary culture. In his
contribution to *The Ideas Market* (2004), for example, David Carter argues that “there has been something of a boom in public intellectual life” in recent years (Carter, 2004, p.2). The ‘intellectual’ is no longer hidden away within the ivory tower (as if he/she ever was). The ‘intellectual’ is becoming “well-represented in the mainstream media and public forums” (Ibid). Lumby is a contributor to *The Ideas Market*, and she has fashioned herself as a ‘public intellectual’ (Lumby, 2004).

Throughout *Bad Girls*, Lumby displays an acute awareness of the increasingly mediatised nature of Western public spheres. She also demonstrates an awareness of what has variously been termed the ‘pornification’ or ‘sexualisation’ of Western culture (Paasonen et al, 2007; Rush and La Nauze, 2006). Historically, so-called ‘pornographic’ material has been “confined to the marginal spaces of public and private culture” (Nead, 1992a, p.99). This confinement is reminiscent of the myth that sex was transformed into a private and unspoken activity towards the end of the seventeenth century. Foucault has famously referred to this myth as “the repressive hypothesis” (Foucault, 1976, p.17). In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* trilogy, he contends:

Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly … Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship. (Ibid)

My point here is not that ‘pornographic’ or sexually explicit representations are recent inventions. My point is that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries “have seen an enormous growth in the diversity and quantity of pornography, in the ease with which people can access it and in the range of audiences for it” (McKee et al, 2008, p.20). The boundaries between so-called ‘pornographic’ and ‘non-pornographic’ entertainment have become blurred.

From the hypersexualised star image of Paris Hilton to Madame Tussaud’s wax modelling of porn star Jenna Jameson, texts citing pornographic styles, gestures
and aesthetics … have become staple features of popular media culture in Western societies as commodities purchased and consumed, as individual self-representations and independent porn productions. (Paasonen et al, 2007, p.1).

The increased public visibility of this pornographic aesthetic can be attributed to several factors. These include more permissive attitudes towards, and legal regulation of sex and sexually explicit material. This permissiveness came about largely as part of the ‘sexual revolution’ that I discussed briefly in Chapter One, and will soon explore at greater length. The distribution of sexually explicit and pornographic material has been aided considerably by advances in technology in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. I refer here to mediums such as video, DVD and the internet (Juffer, 2004; McKee et al, 2008).

Lumby asks how women have experienced this increasingly ‘sexualised’ culture, both as consumers and subjects of representation. How are women represented in sexually explicit and ‘pornographic’ media imagery? What do these representations say about the women (and men) in the 1990s? How do women respond to these representations? One of Lumby’s key arguments is that a “viable feminist approach to media images needs to recognise, develop and enhance women’s abilities to negotiate images” (Lumby, 1997a, p.25). Doing this, she argues, means that readers need to consider “what the diversity of women can, and regularly do, make of images” (Ibid). This argument is premised firstly on a key argument of media and cultural studies, which is that a text can generate multiple and often contradictory readings (McKee, 2002). Lumby argues that “feminism ought to be encouraging a broad range of images of and for women, in the media and everyday life” (Lumby, 1997a, p.25).

Also, this argument continues the ongoing destabilising of the category ‘woman’ that I have described at several points already. According to Lumby, feminists should acknowledge that “there is no one ‘real’ woman that feminists have been authorised to speak for, or who could be asked to stand in for all the ‘false’ images of women that supposedly pervade the media landscape (Lumby, 1997b, p.110). Arguments that there are ‘false images’, ‘positive images’ or ‘realistic images’ of women are based on an
acceptance of the idea that ‘woman’ can be easily defined. The ‘woman’ featured in these arguments is offended by sexually explicit representations of any kind. This woman feels degraded by anything that might be labelled ‘pornographic’.

Lumby is highly critical of anti-pornography feminism, a point I will develop in the pages that follow. She also criticises Susan Faludi’s backlash thesis. According to Lumby, Faludi’s text is a prime example of the “media bashing that dominates feminist debate in the 1990s” (Lumby, 1997a, p.xiii). In Backlash, “the forces of conservatism” are “pulling (the) strings of the media, and she places “consumers” in the ‘dupe’ basket” (Ibid). Faludi has avoided this pitfall: she has “miraculously found some dry and high moral ground from which to survey the resultant flood” (Ibid).

Lumby purports to distance herself from this stereotype of the consumer as a dupe to neoconservatism. She also purports to distance herself from the sense of generational conflict that was evoked in the previous two texts that I have addressed in this thesis. In Bad Girls, Lumby argues that “contemporary feminism has fractured along a series of fault lines which have little to do with age and experience, and far more to do with a debate …over the shape and future of feminist ethics” (Lumby, 1997a, p.156). Lumby does not promise to repair these “fault lines”, and (as suggested in the previous chapter) attempting to strike common agreement between feminists is not always possible. Lumby does aim to move beyond framing feminist disagreements about pornography in terms of “a generation gap” in which feminist “daughters are challenging their mothers” (Ibid).

I will argue that Lumby does not ultimately endorse a more inclusive feminist politics. Bad Girls does evoke a generation-based conflict between anti-pornography feminists and ‘anti-censorship/pro-sex’ feminists. Lumby privileges her own readings of media imagery over differing feminist readings. Before making this argument, though, I will look at some of the sources of Lumby’s avowedly ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-censorship’ stance. These sources include the work of U.S. ‘pro-sex’ feminists. They include Foucault’s work on censorship, as well as a distinctly ‘Australian’ – and distinctly ‘Sydney’ - strain of sexual libertarianism. I will specifically address Lumby’s argument...

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70 This is a deliberate reference to Julia Kristeva’s famous argument that “woman can never be defined” (cited in Rose, 1986, p.9).
about feminist alliances with the New Right. This argument is the second significant feature of *Bad Girls*.

**Libertarianism, Feminism, and the New Right**

According to McKenzie Wark, *Bad Girls* reflects what he describes as a “Sydney libertarian strain” of thought (Wark, 1998, p.84). This “strain” has its genesis in the Push movement that flourished in Sydney between the late 1940s and the early 1970s. This movement comprised assorted men and women who congregated in inner-city Sydney. These men and women had “a liking for the bohemian life” and “opposed the church, the State, wowsers and censorship” (Coombs, 1996, p.viii). Feminists who were associated with the Push include Meaghan Morris and Germaine Greer (Lewis, 2003; Wallace, 1998). In her study of The Push, Anne Coombs describes the approach towards censorship that was taken by “the Libertarians” (her term) within this movement. According to Coombs, the Push was “strongly opposed to anyone being prevented from producing and publishing anything they liked” (Coombs, 1996, p.238). Men and women aligned with the Push saw censorship “as impinging on individual freedom and limiting free enquiry” (Ibid).

By the 1970s, The Push was waning as a cultural force but the sexual revolution had begun to impact upon Australia. The arrival of the sexual revolution in this country was signalled by “(t)he increasing importance of sexual discourses that emphasised the liberatory potential of sex and the illegitimacy of legal intervention in the private, sexual activities of adults” (Sullivan, 1997a, p.125). In her book *The Politics of Sex* (1997), political scientist Barbara Sullivan argues that the “libertarian approach to censorship was premised on several distinct assumptions” (Ibid, p.132). These included the assumption that “representations were not real in the way that the actions were” (Ibid). They also included the assumption that “photography and film ‘mirrors life’ … and was a medium that could tell the truth about sex and about violence” (Ibid).

To suggest that *Bad Girls* is a simply an example of traditional sexual libertarianism is, however, simplistic. Lumby concurs with Foucault’s argument about the “repressive hypothesis”. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault corrects this “hypothesis”
by suggesting that censorship has actually helped to produce understandings of sex and sexuality.

All of these negative elements – defenses, censorships, denials – which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former. (Ibid, p.12)

Put simply, censorship produces the very discourses that it tries to silence. Lumby argues that “pornography is not simply an effect of sexuality, but rather, is a means of actively producing the concept of sexuality itself” (Lumby, 1997a, p.105). This can be distinguished from the more traditional libertarian view that representations “mirror” reality. Lumby suggests that anti-pornography feminists “produce” pornography (Ibid. p.xix). These feminists have created the very scenes of sexual degradation that they have vociferously opposed.

There are problems with Lumby’s representation of anti-pornography feminism and her use of the term ‘censorship’, as I will soon discuss. I want to first consider what she says about the stereotyping of anti-pornography feminists “as ‘new Victorians’ or ‘wowsers’” (Ibid, p.xvii). Lumby argues that this stereotyping is “unhelpful” (Ibid, p.xvii):

Antiporn feminists quite rightly object to being dismissed as ‘uptight’ and ‘puritanical’. Their opposition to sexually explicit material may seem like simple wowserism, but the philosophy behind it is a good deal more complex than mere abhorrence of sex. (Ibid)

Nevertheless, Lumby argues that these feminists have made a “pact with the kind of social conservatives who want to abolish abortion, criminalise homosexuality and dismantle feminism” (Ibid, xv).
With this argument, Lumby points to the alliances that have inadvertently formed between the New Right and certain sections of the feminist movement. These kinds of unlikely alliances are, as I have argued, characteristic features of the culture wars as a whole. In Australia, Lumby sees such an alliance at work in a 1991 senate committee on phone sex services. This committee “condemned erotica and pornography” (Ibid, p.56). Committee members included “the feminist Senator Margaret Reynolds … and the conservative independent Senator Brian Harradine” (Ibid). The now-retired Harradine is well-known in Australia for his staunch Catholic faith and his opposition to abortion (Ibid). Lumby quotes Harradine as criticising “X-rated material” because much of it “treats women as commodities” (cited in Lumby, 1997, p.58). This criticism is “perfectly in line” with the discourse of feminists such as Dworkin (Ibid).

In the U.S., Canada and the U.K., alliances between the New Right and anti-pornography feminists have been even stronger and more complex. In Canada during the 1980s and early 1990s, books by gay, lesbian and feminist writers (including Dworkin herself) were prohibited by Canadian officials. Some feminists have suggested these prohibitions were directly related to the Dworkin/MacKinnon pornography ordinance (Duggan and Hunter, 1995, p.10). In 1989, conservative U.S. Senator Jesse Helms cut government funding for a range of artists whose work he considered to be “obscene” (Ibid, p.10). Several of these artists identified as gay or lesbian, and their work was sexually explicit.

Similarly, in the U.K. in 1986, the Labour MP Clare Short introduced “a bill outlawing female nudity in newspapers” (Merck, 1992, p.54). This bill was part of “a pre-emptive strike” by the Labour Party’s left faction “against the Conservative majority, who seemed to monopolize public concern on issues of sexual representation” (Ibid). According to Mandy Merck, “Short and her colleagues actually conferred with Dworkin about draft legislation on the topic of pornography” (Ibid). The U.K. was also home to Mary Whitehouse, a deeply conservative commentator who (over the course of several decades) waged a campaign against sexually explicit material and “called for a return to family values” (Nead, 1992b, p.285).

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71 For an overview of Harradine’s life and career, see Kingston (2004).
Lumby is not the only feminist to argue that portraying pornography – and sexually explicit material in general – as a key site of female subordination and male domination is deeply problematic. This argument has been advanced by other feminist critics of the anti-pornography movement, as well as feminist critics of feminism such as Rene Denfeld. Denfeld has argued that “feminist activists” have found “themselves in agreement with the same ultraconservatives who have tried to censor feminist literature” (Denfeld, 1995, p.94). Anti-pornography feminists and “ultraconservatives” have concurred that any cultural representation of sex is dangerous. This approach to sex presents problems for anyone who wishes to discuss sex, regardless of their political persuasion. As Denfeld points out, the work of Andrea Dworkin features sexually explicit descriptions. These descriptions are apparently intended to emphasise the sexism of certain representations (Ibid, p.102). Yet is this enough reason not to label Andrea Dworkin’s work as ‘pornographic’, and therefore harmful to women?

The political problems that I have described are evident within criticisms of the broader ‘sexualisation’ or ‘pornification’ of culture. These kinds of criticisms tend to assume that sex should be concealed within the ‘private’ sphere and neither seen nor mentioned in the ‘public’ sphere. Yet, as the Australian scholars Mark Pendleton and Tanya Serisier argue, “the relegation of sex to the privacy of the home” has been a primary aim of the political right (Pendleton and Serisier, 2008, p.49). So too has the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, as I argue in the following chapter.

Secondly, criticisms of the ‘sexualisation of culture’ tend to be premised on the assumption that sex in any form disempowers women and empowers men. Sex, here, is beyond salvation: the sexist status quo is reinforced every time sex appears on a billboard or a television screen. Conversely, Pendleton and Serisier argue that “the problem isn’t the proliferation of sex but rather the presentation of sexual desire through mass marketing campaigns and ongoing sexism” (Ibid). The American commentator Ariel Levy makes a similar point in her popular book Female Chauvinist Pigs (2005). Levy

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72 This point is made quite effectively in Harriet Gilbert’s (1992) reading of Dworkin’s novel Mercy (1990). This novel depicts the repeated sexual abuse which one woman suffers over several decades. As Gilbert argues, the accounts of violent sexuality that are featured throughout Mercy differ little to the violent sexuality described in the Marquis de Sade’s novel Justine. I discuss Justine in Chapter Six.
argues that the “glossy, overheated thump of sexuality in our culture” is directly related to consumerism and sexist views about women (Levy, 2005, p.31).

In the next section, I will address Lumby’s readings of two print advertisements which generated controversy in Australia during the 1990s for attempting to sell products by using imagery that some commentators found sexist. Both readings are as “deliberately, if not desperately, provocative” as the front cover of Bad Girls (valentine, 1997, p.55). This cover depicts a woman wearing a diaphanous white crop-top and a pair of tight denim shorts into which is placed a phallic remote control (Ibid). These readings are both framed in terms of reclaiming female sexuality. The politics of reclamation have been debated at length by feminists. In The Lesbian Heresy, Jeffreys approvingly cites the feminist author Patricia Duncker’s argument:

One of the danger signs which indicate that someone is about to begin compromising their feminist politics … is the moment when they declare that they are re-claiming something: marriage, the family, love, femininity or traditional religion. (cited in Jeffreys, 1993a, p.147).

Lumby takes a different approach. In the opening pages of Bad Girls, she cites an episode that took place in New York. It is appropriate that Lumby uses an example from America, given her book so heavily references U.S. feminist debates. She recalls: “While I was writing this book, I bought a baseball cap which reads: Bitch … ‘bitch’ is a traditional term for dampening the aspirations of uppity women and I figured it was time for a little reappropriation” (Lumby, 1997a, p.xxiv). Lumby notes that an “African-American woman” responded to the aforementioned cap “with obvious horror” (Ibid). This is because “bitch connotes male sexual ownership in the black community” (Ibid). Yet Lumby chooses to read this episode as evidence of “the tendency people have to reinvent and appropriate meaning for their own ends” (Ibid). This anecdote suggests the self-bias that is evidenced throughout Bad Girls. Feminist critiques of media sexism are regarded as being problematic in this book, but Lumby does not problematise her own views about female sexual empowerment and/in the media.
It may have become apparent that the kind of pornography I have been referring to, and will continue to refer to, in this chapter is that which is aimed at a heterosexual male audience. There are many genres of pornography that I do not discuss. For instance, I do not discuss child pornography. This may seem surprising given my emphasis on cultural anxieties about young people and sexuality. Lumby mentions the issue of child pornography briefly in *Bad Girls*, and has written about it at length elsewhere (see Lumby, 1997a, pp. 146-8; Lumby, 1998; McKee et al, 2008, pp. 149-65). Her chief emphasis in *Bad Girls*, though, is on representations of women.

Also, I do not discuss cultural anxieties about women and young people encountering sexual danger on the internet. This danger has included stumbling upon websites containing violent pornography and being stalked by sex offenders. The threat of sexual danger on the internet has been the topic of immense scholarly and media debate since the mid-1990s (see Howitt and Sheldon, 2007; Taylor and Quayle, 2003). The internet appears in *Bad Girls* in the context of an analysis of “new media” (Lumby, 1997a, pp. 136-53). Throughout the book, however, Lumby focuses mostly on print media.

‘Dominant Feminism’, ‘Media Literacy’ and ‘Censorship’

I will begin this section by briefly describing the two advertisements that Lumby analyses. These descriptions will help to contextualise Lumby’s argument, as well as my own. The first advertisement is for Paul Picot, a Swiss company which specialises in “luxury watches” (Paul Picot, company website). This advertisement depicts a young woman wearing a silk negligee and sitting on a chair reading a book. The woman is being fondled by a hand belonging to a suit-wearing, presumably male figure; a Picot watch is visible on his wrist. The woman grasps her breast. Her facial expression suggests she is either absorbed with the contents of her book, overcome with erotic pleasure, or a combination of both. This image is accompanied by a message that reads (in part): “When you see this model in the flesh, you’ll express your desire for it on sight. After all

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73 In 2006, Lumby and her partner Duncan Fine published *Why TV is Good for Kids*. As its cheeky title suggests, this book purports to debunk myths that television viewing is harmful to children.

74 In Lumby’s book, the “new media” also encompasses video games.
we never told you to look but not touch” (cited in Lumby, 1997a, p.2). The second advertisement is for Berlei lingerie. This advertisement depicts a woman lying in a box, being sawn in half in the manner of the “traditional magic trick” (Ibid, p.69). The woman is smiling. This image is accompanied by the message: “You’ll always feel good in Berlei” (Ibid, p.70).

Lumby cites a number of hostile responses to these advertisements. The Picot advertisement was publicly “denounce(d)” by Cheryl Kernot, then leader of the Australian Democrats (Ibid, p.3). According to Kernot, this advertisement was “derogatory and demeaning in the extreme and blatantly insulting not just to women but also to men” (cited in Ibid). This advertisement was also criticised by an anonymous writer of a “complaint” letter, who argued that it “convey(ed) the misleading message that women condone and enjoy being molested” (Ibid). A billboard displaying the Berlei advertisement was spray-painted by a group of “young women” because “they believed the image promoted violence against women” (Ibid, p.69). These women appeared before New South Wales magistrate Pat O’Shane, who used her “discretionary powers to record no conviction” against them (Ibid). O’Shane claims she reached this decision because she “found it … ‘very, very difficult’ to see the ad as doing anything other than inciting violence against women” (cited in Ibid).

Throughout *Bad Girls*, Lumby aligns these responses with anti-pornography feminism. References to “pro-censorship” and “anti-pornography” feminism are threaded throughout the text. This is despite the fact that none of the aforementioned critics identify with the anti-pornography feminist movement, and that “feminist opposition to pornography … never assumed the same dimensions” in Australia “as in the United States” (Sullivan, 1997a, p.166). This does not contradict my earlier observation that there have been feminists in Australia who have spoken out against pornography; it means that these feminists did not have the numbers or the kind of political influence that they did in America or even Britain. Kimberley O’Sullivan has suggested that pornography debates were most vibrant amongst lesbian feminists in Australia (O’Sullivan, 1997, p.123). Hawthorne (1991) critiques pornography from a radical lesbian feminist perspective, as does Jeffreys in *The Lesbian Heresy*. According to

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75 In Australia, the Democrats are a minor party aligned with the centre-left.
O’Sullivan, there was no high-profile Australian feminist equivalent to Dworkin or MacKinnon taking these debates to a “heterosexual feminist audience” (Ibid, p.124).

In aligning feminist critiques of the aforementioned advertisements with anti-pornography feminism, Lumby is able to construct a feminist standpoint against which to define her own. I suggest she does this in order to support her argument – an argument she shares with Jill Julius Matthews and Marilyn Lake – that the “the dominant (feminist) point of view” in Australia has been one that emphasises female victimisation (Lumby, 1997a, p.71). The title of Lumby’s text becomes more than simply salacious and tongue-in-cheek. Lumby suggests that feminists who celebrate female sexual pleasure are “bad girls” because they are rebelling against a repressive and “dominant” feminist order. Most specifically, argues Lumby, these feminists - and she includes herself as one of them - are rebelling against what she refers to as the “popular feminist critique of the media” (Ibid, p.xxv). This is a critique that Lumby accuses of having become “become self-satisfied and lazy” (Ibid).

In advancing the latter argument, Lumby polarises feminist perspectives on sexually explicit material. Lumby also evokes a sense of generational conflict between feminists. This is striking, particularly given that she has criticised sections of the media for framing her text in terms of a ‘young/old’ feminist dualism. Such a criticism is made in Lumby’s essay ‘Generation Panics: Age, Knowledge and Cultural Power in a New Media Era’ (2001). Lumby argues that, in this aftermath of the controversy surrounding The First Stone, the Australian “media was desperate to find exemplars of the brave new feminist wave” (Lumby, 2001, p.217). Bad Girls was chosen as such an exemplar, despite the fact that the publication of the text came a “few months before my 35th birthday, at an age when my doctor was reminding me that my childbearing years would soon come to an end” (Ibid).

The extraordinary anger and dissension unleashed by Garner’s book is of interest to me here for the way a complex debate about gender, sex and ethics was so frequently and effortlessly recast as a generational struggle about who ‘owned’ feminism. Despite the very different agendas and ideological positions which grounded three ‘young’ feminist books published in the same period, authors
Kathy Bail, Virginia Trioli and myself were all … asked to account for the ‘victim’ feminism which had supposedly infected young women in the 1990s and, in more general terms, to explain our generation to older feminists. (Ibid, p.218)76

Like *Eat Me* and *The River Ophelia*, Lumby’s text was frequently classified as an example of “young” feminist writing. According to a number of reviewers, “young” feminist texts such as *Bad Girls* endorse overwhelmingly positive perspectives on sex. These texts have also rejected victim/oppressor dichotomies. Lake argues that “*Bad Girls* challenges good women to rethink their politics” (Lake, 1997, p.339). In his review, Wark praises Lumby’s text for recognising that “the media have (sic) evolved way beyond the image of it formed in feminist media criticism of the 1970s” (Wark, 1998, p.87).

Lumby may acknowledge the limitations of dividing feminists into different generations, but this is exactly what she does in *Bad Girls*. Lumby echoes Wark’s above-cited comment when she argues that feminists “have failed to grasp the contradictory, constantly shifting nature of contemporary mass-media imagery and to realise that the mass media is not a stable platform for pushing political or moral values of any single persuasion” (Lumby, 1997a, p.xxiii). Lumby refers to feminists who have opposed sexually explicit media imagery, as well as feminists who have specifically opposed ‘pornography’. These feminists are all accused of portraying the media as “a monolithic institution which somehow speaks in the voice of mainstream patriarchy (with a capitalist accent)” (Ibid). In doing this, they have “endorse(d) a vision of society in which right-minded feminists will act as de facto spiritual parents to the rest of us (with the aid of state power)” (Ibid).

The sense of generational conflict becomes particularly overt when Lumby argues that these “spiritual parents” represent the “old guard” of feminism, and they can “look an awful lot like the patriarchy” to young feminists (Ibid, p.156).77 These “younger feminists” have “distaste for a reactive (sic) victim rhetoric and an intolerance for the

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76 Bail is the author of *DIY Feminism* (1996).
77 The “old guard” in Lumby’s text also includes feminists such as Anne Summers, who (as mentioned briefly in Chapter One) has publicly expressed controversial views about young feminists.
generalisations about men and heterosexuality which dog feminist debate” (Ibid, p.160). They do not wish to “identify as victims” or as being politically opposed to sex (Ibid). “Younger” feminists are also media literate. For Lumby, “(m)edia literacy … requires an intuitive understanding of the way different media texts interact” (Ibid, p.67). “Younger” feminists “have grown up in a mass-mediated culture and have developed highly sophisticated ways of interacting with the images and ideas that bombard them daily” (Lumby, 1997b, p.113). Yet they are being accused by feminist media critics of being duped by advertising that promotes unrealistic body images and stereotypes about female sexuality (Ibid).

Again, we encounter a scenario whereby rebellious ‘young’ feminists attempt to liberate themselves from their feminist ‘political mothers’. In Bad Girls, ‘young’ women have grown up in a media-saturated culture and (perhaps because of this) want to see the media as a site of sexual pleasure and empowerment. ‘Older’ feminists, conversely, view the media as heavily imbued with sexism, and thus want to ‘censor’ it. The two key terms here are ‘media literacy’ and ‘censorship’. I want to look at these terms more closely, and particularly at the selective way that Lumby uses both of them. This will enable us to further understand the limitations of her argument.

‘Media literacy’ is commonly understood as a by-product of a culture in which the media has played an increasingly significant and complex role. According to Carolyn Hicks, “GenXers” had grown up “grown up deconstructing media texts” (Hicks, 1996, p.71). GenXers were wary of media manipulation and have “had a … habit of pointing out to marketers exactly what they were trying to do in their focus groups” (Ibid, p.72). Hicks describes the efforts undertaken by advertisers to market products to GenXers who were “bored with consumerist hype, scornful of advertising claims that they can become beautiful and popular by making certain consumer choices …” (Ibid, p.74). To support her point, Hicks cites a range of advertisements that clearly emphasise their status as advertisements. These include an advertisement for Diesel which depicts a group of shirtless men with well-oiled muscly bodies striking stereotypical ‘beefcake’ poses alongside the slogan: “Thanks Diesel, for making us so very beautiful” (cited in Ibid, p.72).
Lumby concurs with Hicks and argues that “(c)ontemporary advertisers” are “(a)ware they’re dealing with an image-literate public” and thus “trade in images which acknowledge their status as images” (Lumby, 1997a, p.70). This argument, too, has a basis in fact:

Ads often seem … concerned with amusing us, setting a puzzle for us to work out … The aim of ads is to engage us in their structure of meaning, to encourage us to participate by decoding their linguistic and visual signs and to enjoy this decoding activity … At the same time that we are reading and decoding the signs in ads, we participate in the structures of meaning that ads use to represent us, the advertised product, and society. (Bignell, 1997, pp. 33-4)

Advertisements are much like pornography in that they are highly “visible as targets of critique or analysis” (Wicke, 1993, p.67). Both advertising and pornography are widely circulated, and thus belong to what is sometimes termed “mass culture” – a point I will develop in greater length in the following chapter (Ibid). In recent decades, advertisers have become aware that they are marketing products to a generation that is more “media savvy” than previous generations (Lumby, 1997a, p.72). Lumby acknowledges this, and argues that “the media is like a virus. It infects everything it touches, but it is also, in turn, changed by what it comes into contact with – it mutates” (Ibid, p.xxiii).

Thus, to reiterate another key argument of media and cultural studies, the relationship between consumers and advertising is not a straightforward one in which a naïve consumer is manipulated by cunning marketers. The relationship between spectators and sexually explicit imagery is similarly complex. Sexually explicit and ‘pornographic’ visual imagery can invite multiple interpretations. Some of these interpretations can be at odds with the politics of the man or woman who views this imagery. To demonstrate my point, consider the discussion amongst a group of feminists about pornography that was published in a 1994 edition of the U.S. feminist magazine Ms. The author Marilyn French discusses a scene in the controversial film Deep Throat (1972) “in which a very large and very erect penis came up to (a) vulva. The colouring of the shot was extremely beautiful” (cited in Dworkin et al, 1994, p.35). French asks
The pornography discussed in the *Ms* article is perhaps the best-known and most publicly visible kind: visual pornography that is marketed towards a heterosexual male audience. Yet feminists as well as gay, lesbian and queer artists have also used sexually explicit material to subvert patriarchal and heteronormative ideas about sexuality (Ibid; Straayer, 2004). In *The Porn Report* (2008), which Lumby co-authored with Alan McKee and Kath Albury, the example of Fatale Video (a lesbian porn production company) is used. According to the authors, films produced by Fatale have been “designed not only to be erotic, but to instruct lesbian and bisexual women in the diverse pleasures of women’s sexuality by offering examples of alternate sexual practices (such as female ejaculation)” (McKee et al, 2008, p.106). Similar arguments have been made about pornography marketed to gay men (Burger, 1995). Queer pornography is not inherently transgressive, although it has provided some queer artists with a medium through which to express and interrogate their sexuality. This is a sexuality that is either attacked or rendered invisible in heterosexual culture.

Equally, there is no evidence that sexually explicit material actually provokes violence against women. This argument has commonly been advanced by anti-pornography feminists. For example, in her book *Making Violence Sexy* (1993), Diana E.H. Russell draws a more or less direct correlation between pornography and “violence against women” (Russell, 1993, p.8). Russell attempts to support this correlation by referring to “experimental and survey data” and “testimonies by pornography models … sexual offenders and men who have worked in the pornographic industry” (Ibid, p.10). There is no denying that some women have been exploited (sexually and otherwise) in the making of pornography, although this is not true of all women’s experiences in the pornography industry (see McKee et al, 2008, pp. 101-48).

Also, there are problems with relying on “experimental and survey data” to gauge the effects pornography has on consumers. For instance, in *The Porn Report*, Lumby and her co-authors point out that these experiments “can sometimes produce negative effects”

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78 For a critique of gay male pornography which is informed by anti-pornography feminism, see Stoltenberg (1992).
because “the subjects are exposed to material that they don’t necessarily like, for an hour, in a room full of strangers …” (Ibid, p.79). The U.K. media studies academic Karen Boyle aligns with anti-pornography feminism, but nevertheless argues that research into the “effects” of pornography upon consumers “rarely differentiates between media” (Boyle, 2000, p.189). Visual pornography, for example, is in many ways consumed quite differently to literary pornography. Sexually explicit advertisements may be read differently again to visual or literary material that is marketed as ‘pornography’.

Yet these facts do not make any sexually explicit representation “exempt from criticism” (Conor, 1996, p.67). In Bad Girls, “criticism” equals “censorship”. When Lumby describes certain feminists as being “pro-censorship”, she implies that they not only object to sexually explicit material – they want this material to be subject to state regulation. This argument is not entirely misguided, as is suggested by the way that the New Right has appropriated feminist rhetoric about the dangers of pornography to further their own political agenda. The legal crackdowns on lesbian, gay and feminist books by Canadian officials may well have stemmed from the Dworkin/MacKinnon ordinance, even if neither of those theorists advocated the seizure of such material. The difficulty of defining ‘pornography’ – a difficulty that will be described in the following chapter – means that (for some commentators) ‘pornography’ could be understood as any representation depicting sex acts that are situated outside the boundaries of monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality. In Australia in 2007, for example, the federal government led by John Howard committed $189 million to an internet filter which would offer “protection for families from internet pornography, violence and sexual predators” (Shanahan and Rowbotham, 2007). Yet again in the realm of public discourse, pornography and violence are interlinked – only now it is ‘families’ (as opposed to ‘women’) who are under threat.

However, in Bad Girls, “censorship” also refers to hostile words or arguments that are made about certain sexually explicit representations. A judge or a politician verbally denouncing these representations is not comparable in any simple way to a judge imposing a legal ban upon them. As Dworkin argued, the term ‘censorship’ has become “separate from any material definition, separate from police power, separate from state repression (jail, banning, exile, death), separate from devastating consequences to real
people” (Dworkin, 1988, p.255). The anonymous letter-writer who criticised the Berlei advertisement can hardly be described as carrying out an act of censorship, nor can Cheryl Kernot when she made her dismissive remarks about this advertisement. The defacement of the Berlei billboard is similarly difficult to define as an act of censorship. As kylie valentine points out: “… defacing a billboard is exactly an example of reading an image in informed and diverse ways, exactly what advertising agencies seem to want and cultural studies as a pedagogical model certainly encourages” (valentine, 1997, p.56). This is the kind of creative approach to media and cultural studies that Lumby endorses in *Bad Girls*. Despite this, she suggests that the billboard defacers tried naively “to impute magical powers of persuasion to ads” (Lumby, 1997a, p.70). These women were not media-literate.

Indeed, some so-called ‘anti-pornography’ feminists have been openly critical of censorship. Dworkin describes the impact of artistic censorship in her familiarly impassioned, personalised style:

> Censorship goes after the act and the actor: the book and the writer. It needs to destroy both. The cost in human lives is staggering, and it is perhaps essential to say that human lives destroyed must count more in the weighing of horror than books burned. This is my personal view, and I love books more than I love people. (Dworkin, 1988, p.255)

In response to accusations that anti-pornography feminists advocate censorship, Dworkin writes that she has not aimed to “force … pornography back underground”, but to “put a floodlight” on “how it is used, what it does” – particularly when this involves the perpetuation of demeaning gender stereotypes (Ibid, p.273). As the feminist attorney Norma Ramos argues, “censorship helps pornography flourish” (cited in Dworkin et al, 1994, p.41). This is in itself not dissimilar to Lumby’s argument that censorship “produces pornography”, but with one important difference. Feminists such as Dworkin and Ramos view pornography as being inherently sexist, and there can be no alternate reading; whereas for Lumby, the arguments of anti-pornography feminists suffuse certain
materials with sexist messages. For feminists such as Lumby, pornography is not inherently anything.

Underpinning Lumby’s accusation of censorship lies the more traditional libertarian assumption that “free sexual expression” is the key to “social liberation” – and hence that any attempt to criticise this expression equates to political repression. This kind of argument is problematic in that it does not always take into account whose “free sexual expression” is being privileged or catered to in a particular representation. MacKinnon, for instance, criticises the libertarian myth that censorship is “a form of sexual repression” and “the more sex an individual or society has, in print or in life interchangeably, the more sexually free and healthy he/she/it is” (MacKinnon, 1987, p.144). MacKinnon argues that “(m)en have eroticized the idea that their sexuality has been denied … their sexuality has been nothing but expressed and expressed and expressed” (Ibid). This reads like a feminist variation of Foucault’s warning against the idea that discourses about sex have been repressed. As Foucault put it, “when one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion” (Foucault, 1976, p.17). Foucault never mentioned that this “discursive explosion” about sex has historically been biased towards men; MacKinnon does mention this bias.

In the following section, I will address Lumby’s readings of the Picot and Berlei advertisements. These readings are focused on “what she fancies” (Peers, 1997), and this in itself further contradicts her advocacy of an inclusive feminist approach towards the media. My aim is not to invalidate Lumby’s point-of-view, or to stage yet another conflict between ‘pro-sex/pornography’ and ‘anti-sex/pornography’ feminists. I support Lumby’s argument that we need to consider how “the diversity” of feminists can interpret sexually explicit media imagery. Thus, I juxtapose Lumby’s readings with insights made by feminists who have opposed pornography and/or sexually explicit media imagery.

**Pleasure and Danger in Feminist Media Analysis**

Lumby concedes that she has “reinvented” the advertising imagery which she analyses “in my favour” and “in line with my desires” (Lumby, 1997a, p.xxv). Lumby admits to
having “minimised details which suggest cruelty” (Ibid). Accordingly, she reads the Picot advertisement as “a common enough portrait of sexual intimacy played out in different ways in millions of Australian homes daily” (Ibid, p.1):

A woman is sitting in a chair reading a book. She has showered and put on a satin nightgown ready for bed. Her lover … comes up behind her and slips his hand inside the gown to fondle her breast. The gown falls off her shoulder. Aroused but keen to finish the last few sentences on the page before her, the woman begins touching herself through the clinging fabric while her eyes linger on the book. (Ibid)

Lumby reads the Berlei advertisement as depicting “a hokey magical scenario which has been reversed – turned against the magician” (Ibid, p.70). She cites the “cartoonishly wide, white, serrated perforation which suggests a sawing action, runs vertically through the entire poster …” (Ibid). Lumby interprets this “serrated perforation” as a suggestion that it is “the magic act, not just the woman’s body which has been ‘cut’ in two” (Ibid). Lumby argues that the female model in the advertisement is “smilingly knowingly – the implication is that she’s the one in charge of the trick” (Ibid; her emphasis).

Lumby constantly emphasises that the above readings are “my” (her) own. Yet she does not suggest how these readings could be subject to criticism. Nor does Lumby problematise her own professional and intellectual standpoint. According to Juliet M. Peers:

(Lumby) continually warns off experts from foreclosing upon the consumer as sentient chooser, yet hardly acknowledges the implications of her positioning as a member of the elite, a high-profiled writer and academic, someone whose voice can be broadcast to millions through print and electronic media in a way that the
voice of any woman who purchases *Woman’s Day* at her local milkbar will never – repeat never – be heard. (Peers, 1997, p.39)  

This is neither an attack against academic feminists in general nor a personal attack on Lumby. What Peers does is highlight the hypocrisy that lies at the heart of Lumby’s argument. Throughout *Bad Girls*, Lumby criticises feminists whose perspective she disagrees with for representing the “dominant” strand of Australian – and, it seems, *Western* - feminism. Yet, as Wark’s own overview of the publicity campaign for *Bad Girls* attests, Lumby has featured prominently in the media as an ‘expert’ on sex and gender. This ‘expertise’ is reinforced by her academic credentials. The suggestion of rebellion within the title *Bad Girls* becomes questionable.

Moreover, Peers’ review of *Bad Girls* is useful in that it highlights the profound individualism at the heart of this text. “Of all shades of fundamentalists”, Peers argues, “libertarians are perhaps the most insidious, as their prejudices are less obvious and therefore their public pronouncements and rule-making go relatively unchallenged” (Ibid, p.39). Lumby might endorse a “diversity” of feminist media analyses, but it is *her* analysis which holds the greatest intellectual and political credibility. Lumby accuses certain feminists of “attempt(ing) to replace one supposedly dominant cultural viewpoint (the patriarchal one) with another feminist reading”, though my contention is that Lumby does just this (Lumby, 1997a, p.71).

Indeed, Lumby’s tendency to portray her own argument as beyond debate or criticism makes *Bad Girls* somewhat reminiscent of *The First Stone*. In that book, Garner’s perspective on sex and gender took precedence, and feminists whose politics she opposed were denounced as “punitive”. This individualism has (as I argued in Chapter Two) also featured in the work of U.S. commentators such as Rene Denfeld. Lumby criticises Denfeld for drawing a straightforward link between anti-pornography feminists and “Victorian social purity campaigners” (Ibid, p.xvii). Nevertheless, Lumby herself aligns these feminists with a pro-censorship conservatism. Also, like Denfeld,

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79 *Woman’s Day* is a tabloid magazine which (as its title suggests) is marketed primarily towards a female readership. ‘Milkbar’ is a popular Australian term for what might elsewhere be described as a ‘corner shop’.
Lumby frames her opposition to anti-pornography feminism in terms of a generational conflict: Lumby represents a media-literate ‘new’ feminism and her feminist opponents represent an ‘older’ and less media-literate feminism.

I argue that by listening to opposing feminist voices, we can better understand how advertisements such as those for Picot and Berlei can be the site of “pleasure and danger” (Vance, 1992) for female spectators. These advertisements are open to a range of interpretations. As Lumby herself suggests, though, one interpretation should not take precedence over another. Readings which emphasise female sexual disempowerment should not take precedence over those which emphasise female sexual empowerment, and vice versa. A useful starting point to analysing both advertisements is to consider the very basic fact that they use images of women to market their respective products. According to Lumby:

> It has become an item of faith in popular feminist debate that it’s wrong to use women’s bodies to sell things. The equation is simple – in a capitalist and patriarchal society, women’s use-value is reduced to their sexual usefulness to men. Like watches and widgets, women are packaged and commodified for the pleasure of the dominant sex. (Lumby, 1997a, p.9)

According to Lumby, this perspective ignores “the role that desire, fantasy and pleasure plays in the way we consume images and goods” (Lumby, 1997b, p.110). Fantasy and identification are indeed complex and unpredictable, as I will argue in the following chapter. Yet Lumby does not consider more specific reasons why certain advertisements have been the subject of feminist protest. Again speaking on a basic level, both the Berlei and Picot advertisements evoke a subject/object dichotomy in which the female models are positioned as objects. Both advertisements can be read as portraying a relationship between “women’s sexuality” – and, in particular, female sexual submissiveness – and the products being sold.

The Picot advertisement may be read as a scene of domestic intimacy. The sexualisation of the female model is unmistakeable. In the Picot advertisement, the scantily-clad body of the female model is positioned in the middle of the frame, a stark
contrast with the suitjacket-clad arm of the otherwise unseen and (presumably) male figure. The woman is seated, whereas the male figure is standing and his arm is resting upon her. Worded very crudely, she is ‘passive’ while he is ‘active’. Could this woman be “the model” you will “desire” when you see her “in the flesh”? If this is the case, the woman can be read as having been reduced to the status of the Picot watch: an alluring commodity whose sole purpose is to arouse the male consumer.

In her review of *Bad Girls*, Spongberg suggests a similar, though more sophisticated, reading of the Picot advertisement. According to Spongberg, the image evokes the old myth that “novel reading” is “dangerous” because it supposedly allows women “forbidden knowledge of sexuality and of the world outside the domestic realm” (Spongberg, 1997, p. 343). The facial expression of the female model can suggest both her absorption in her book and also “sexual ecstasy” (Ibid). The appearance of the male figure can, Spongberg suggests, be read as “the intrusion of phallic sexuality, or the intrusion of the harsh world of male commerce, where time means money” (Ibid).

Spongberg suggests that the “watch might be a clue” because the advertisement “is, after all, meant to be selling watches” (Ibid). According to this reading, the Picot advertisement is not simply another example of a woman’s body being used to sell a product. In this reading, the image of a man intruding on a woman’s intimate space is being used to market Picot watches. The woman threatens to enter the “world outside the domestic realm” through her novel-reading. This transgression is not tolerated in “the world of male commerce”, in which women have traditionally been confined to the roles of wives, mothers and sources of emotional and sexual support.

The Berlei advertisement seems consciously aimed at provoking a heated public – and specifically, a heated *feminist* - response. In this sense, the advertisement lends support to Lumby’s argument that “contemporary advertisers” are “(a)ware they’re dealing with an image-literate public”. Or, put another way, the advertisers were possibly aware that they would generate controversy (and therefore generate publicity for their product) by rebelling against a perceived “dominant” feminist perspective on representations of women. This is a variation on an older trend amongst advertising

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80 For perspectives on women and novel-reading, see Donovan (1999); Radway (1984).
companies to “cast ‘stereotypes because that is the safest middle course and will not offend anyone’” (Crawford, 2008, p.196).\(^8\)

Also, the Berlei advertisement taps into controversies about dominance-submission sexuality. I refer firstly to those feminist debates (which I will discuss in the following two chapters) around whether sexuality structured around dominance and submission contributes to women’s oppression. I refer also to the controversy that has frequently surrounded pornography which depicts S/M. This has tended to be the most controversial form of pornography, with some critics dismissing it as “violent and dangerous” (Califia, 1994, p.167). This is despite the fact that there is no general consensus amongst feminists as to whether S/M and sexual submissiveness are always oppressive.

As Lumby acknowledges, “(c)ontext and category … are everything when it comes to both sex and sexism” (Lumby, 1997a, p.113). With this in mind, a closer look at the Berlei image is required. This image did not appear in the work of pro-S/M feminists such as Pat (now ‘Patrick’) Califia (1994), but in an advertisement selling lingerie. The advertisers may well aim to generate controversy, but this does not make the advertisement immune from accusations that it eroticises violence against women. Importantly, the Berlei image appeared on billboards. This kind of exposure makes the advertisement even more visible in the public sphere than advertisements which are published in magazines or newspapers. The Australian scholar Lauren Rosewarne (2004) argues that this kind of outdoor advertising exemplifies what she calls “street harassment”. This term is useful

…because it is a concept that takes into consideration the unique elements of public space and the fact that street harassment is something that women experience more often than men, and which contributes to the pervasive fears of crime women harbour. (Ibid)\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Crawford attributes this remark to the undated *Submission to the National Health and Medical Research Council Inquiry into Television Advertising of Foods Directed at Children.*

\(^8\) Rosewarne also classifies graffiti as a form of “street harassment”. This may be true of graffiti depicting discriminatory messages, but cannot describe (say) the graffiti on the Berlei billboards. The women who defaced this billboard were responding to imagery they found sexist; they were not perpetuating sexism.
According to Lumby, the women who defaced the Berlei billboard were motivated by a belief that the image “invites sexual violence against women” (Lumby, 1997a, pp.69-70). This may be true, though Lumby does not consider that advertisements such as this one may contribute to some women’s anxieties about sexual violence. The relegation of women and sex to the ‘private’ domestic realm is problematic, but so too is the danger which women can face in the ‘public’ realm of the streets.

I have argued that *Bad Girls* is a significant text for this thesis because Lumby critiques the alliance between feminists and the New Right, and because she advocates an inclusive approach to feminist media analysis. However, I have argued that a paradox arises in her readings of sexually explicit media imagery. Lumby suggests that her own “provocative” and libertarian readings of this imagery are most befitting media-literate “young” women in the 1990s. Conversely, she portrays criticisms of this kind of imagery as symptomatic of a “lazy”, old-fashioned, anti-media and anti-pornography feminism. I have argued that, in doing this, Lumby reproduces the kind of feminist generational conflict she supposedly abhors, as well as a distinct sense of individualism. *Bad Girls* ultimately succeeds in transplanting a popular representation of the U.S. ‘sex wars’ into an Australian context, rather than working towards a genuinely nuanced feminist perspective on sexually explicit visual representations.
Chapter Five
Who’s On Top? *Eat Me*, Fantasy and the Consumption of Australian Women’s Sexually Explicit Fiction

*When I kiss your mouth I wanna taste it
Turn you upside down, don’t wanna waste it*  
(Merril Bainbridge, ‘Mouth’)

*Eat Me* is a literary intervention into feminist debates about sexually explicit representations. I specifically focus on the metaphor of eating that appears in Linda Jaivin’s novel. I argue that the enthusiastic consumption of food undertaken by Jaivin’s female protagonists can be read firstly as a metaphor for women’s consumption of sexually explicit literature; and secondly for the sexual objectification of men by women. Throughout *Eat Me*, Jaivin raises a number of questions that will be explored throughout this chapter. These questions include: how has the field of sexually explicit writing been gendered? What are the political advantages of sexually explicit fiction that is written by and for women? Can representations of dominance-submission sexuality be regarded as anti-feminist even if they are produced by a woman and framed as female sexual fantasies? How and why does Jaivin use the figure of a feminist academic in her novel to expound views about sex and feminism in the 1990s?

This is, in some respects, the most broad-ranging chapter of the thesis. There is discussion of such diverse issues as pornography, fantasy, humour, food, the body, shame, the domestic sphere, the gendering of fiction and the metaphor of a global feminist community. I do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of all these issues, and at any rate, there is not the space to do so. When I address these issues, I do so with specific reference to the way they are represented throughout Jaivin’s novel. This novel is far more theoretically and politically engaged than its playful narrative and prose might suggest.

“A New Genre”: Australian Women’s Sexually Explicit Writing in the 1990s

In 1995, Nikki Christer (then publisher with Picador) announced “a new genre for women”, one which was based around the question: “Where do you draw the line
between erotica and pornography?” (cited in Paviour, 1995, p.54). Christer cited *The River Ophelia* as an example of this genre. In a review article, Wark argued that both Ettrle’s novel and *Eat Me* were examples of what he called “younger feminist voices” (Wark, 1995, p.26). These novels were both written by “younger” feminists, and were proof that (despite what Helen Garner suggested in *The First Stone*) young women were not anti-sex and prudish.

The suggestion that the “new genre” of Australian women’s writing was a mid-1990s showcase for “younger feminists” is certainly headline-worthy. Ultimately, though, this suggestion lacks nuance. From the 1980s on, there was publication of numerous novels and collections of sexually explicit women’s fiction. These include *Moments of Desire* (1989), *Quiver* (1996), *Sex Crime* (1996), *Women’s Erotica* (1988), *Working Hot* (1989), *Women Love Sex* (1996). They also include the short stories published in the now-defunct magazine *Australian Women’s Forum* (Nolan, 2001, p.22). The authors of these works were of various ages and did not identify with a single feminist standpoint. Nevertheless, they all acknowledged that sexually explicit writing had traditionally been a “male-dominated field” (Ettrle, 1995b). These acknowledgments were made within their narratives, as well as in the publicity surrounding them (for example, interviews). Jaivin has stated that *Eat Me* is “an answer to all the male-oriented pornography and erotica around” (cited in Nolan, 2001, p.23).

This “new genre” for women appeared in the context of an increase in sexually explicit cultural production by women (Straayer, 2004). My focus in this chapter is on sexually explicit literary representations. In the U.S. and U.K., the 1990s alone saw the publication of collections such as *Erotica: Women’s Writing from Sappho to Margaret Atwood* (1990) and *The Penguin Book of Erotic Stories by Women* (1995). As the Australian author Rosie Scott observed in a 1992 essay, “it is women’s writing about sex which I have been looking to recently, partly … because it’s a joy to see how some women writers are trying to find a new language to express this” (Scott, 1992, p.20). Scholars such as Jane Juffer (1998, 2004 and 2005) have analysed the growing popularity of sexually explicit literature that is written by and for women.

*Eat Me* and *The River Ophelia* are distinctive in this wave of sexually explicit Australian women’s writing for several reasons. Both were published in 1995, and both
were debut novels for their authors. Both are set in Sydney’s inner-eastern suburbs, in what Wark gushingly describes as that “world of nightclubs and cafes that stretches from Potts Point to Surry Hills” (Wark, 1995, p.26). This location has often been represented within the Australian cultural imaginary as the ultimate site of sexual and intellectual hedonism. Sydney’s inner-east has been home to The Push, the annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and a notorious and publicly visible sex industry (Carbery, 1995; Coombs, 1996). *Eat Me* and *The River Ophelia* both received mixed reviews, though they both achieved considerable commercial success, at least by Australian publishing standards. According to Jaivin, *Eat Me* “sold over 30,000 copies and was on the Australia Best Seller List for 7 months” (cited in Nolan, 2001, p.22). Also, the novel was published “in ten languages” (Ibid). As I will discuss later in the chapter, there was a mild controversy when *Eat Me* was published in America. This controversy taps into debates about sex, representation and censorship.

Both novels utilise three main stylistic devices: self-consciousness, intertextuality and parody. These devices are frequently labelled as ‘postructuralist’ or ‘postmodern’, even if they are hardly recent inventions. In an analysis that is clearly indebted to poststructuralist literary theory, Patricia Waugh argues that self-consciousness is a useful device for authors:

> Writing itself rather than consciousness becomes the main object of attention. Questioning not only the notion of the novelist as God, through the flaunting of the author’s godlike role, but also the authority of consciousness … metafiction establishes the categorization of the world through the arbitrary system of language. (Waugh, 1984, p.24)

Exposing a “text’s process of construction” and questioning of the God/author relationship can also be achieved through the use of intertextuality. Generally speaking, ‘intertextuality’ refers to the way a text self-consciously references one or more other texts (Hayward, 1996, p. 24; Lemke, 1995, pp.10-11). *Eat Me* is framed as a novel-within-a-novel. Throughout this novel-within-a-novel, Jaivin’s characters voice a number of feminist arguments about sex, literature and representation.
Eat Me and The River Ophelia are also highly parodic. According to David Bennett:

The term parody, in contemporary usage, designates a form of literary satire distinguishable from other kinds of satire by its imitative mode, its internal dependence on the devices and targets of its satiric target. Treating discourse as performance, parody enacts its critique of literature from within literature, foregrounding the artifice or factitiousness of its model’s representation of reality, reversing the formal effacement on which the parodied discourse depends for its claims to mimesis or truth. (Bennett, 1985, p.29)

The parodic nature of both novels is most evident in their prose. Jaivin’s prose is deliberately “heavy handed”, and filled with comically exaggerated sexual imagery (Falconer, 1995, p.52). Some critics dismissed this prose as amateurish (Gambotto, 1997). This kind of assessment suggests the sort of ideas about literary merit that I will critique as unhelpful. I argue that Jaivin’s prose is best understood as an alternative to and a parody of the kind of “purple prose that’s in erotica” (cited in Nolan, 2001, p.22). I will soon elaborate on this last point.

While The River Ophelia parodies specific canonical male texts, Eat Me focuses more generally at how the field of sexually explicit writing has been gendered. Jaivin’s text is framed as a comical novel-in-a-novel. This novel-within-a-novel focuses on a group of thirtysomething Sydney women who enjoy eating delectable food, discussing sex and having sex. These activities are often carried out simultaneously. Jaivin’s female protagonists are: the feminist academic Helen, the photographer Julia, the editor Chantal, and the author Philippa. These protagonists also enjoy reading sexually explicit literature, and are intrigued by a novel that Philippa is writing. In the final chapter, it is revealed that they are actually characters in Philippa’s novel, which is titled ‘Eat Me’. This novel has its genesis in ‘fact’: the ‘real-life’ Philippa and her group of ‘real-life’ female friends enjoy combining food and fornication.

Throughout Eat Me, Jaivin specifically asks how sexually explicit writing has been classified as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, as ‘pornography’ or ‘erotica’, and to what
extent these labels are useful. Jaivin also asks where women “get our fantasies, how we feel about our fantasies” (cited in Nolan, 2001, p.23). In *Eat Me*, the above questions are raised and (sometimes) answered by the character Helen. On one level, Helen can be read as a textual stand-in for Jaivin herself. Jaivin has held numerous jobs, including novelist, freelance writer and translator (Gambotto, 1997). She has publicly supported refugee rights (Wynhausen, 2009). However, Jaivin is best known (at least in Australia) as an authority figure on sex and feminism. This is how she has been portrayed in the Australian media (Ibid; and see also Jaivin, 2009; Nolan, 2001). This public profile stems from *Eat Me*, which is arguably her most famous book, as well as later books such as 1997’s *Confessions of an S&M Virgin*.

Furthermore, Jaivin has also been associated with various signifiers of ‘youthful rebellion’. This is even despite the fact that she turned forty years of age the year her debut novel was published. Witness Jaivin’s 1997 interview with the journalist Antonella Gambotto. This piece was initially published in *The Australian* and was reprinted shortly afterwards in a compilation of Gambotto’s writings. In this interview, Gambotto salaciously emphasises Jaivin’s inner-city shared accommodation, love of rock bands and fondness for hosting wild parties (Gambotto, 1997). Several of these pastimes are shared by Helen and her friends.

Yet Helen is also character in a self-conscious and self-reflexive novel which takes issues of sex and representation as its main focus. To this extent, then, she can be read as a parody of the way feminist academics such as Catharine Lumby, as well as feminist authors such as Jaivin, have been portrayed by the media as authority figures on these issues. Helen makes feminist debates about sex and representation the topic of conversation amongst her friends. Jaivin uses ‘Helen’ to make these debates the topic of discussion amongst readers of *Eat Me*.

**Gendering the Text: Beyond ‘Pornography’ and ‘Erotica’**

Closely investigating the distinction (or lack thereof) between ‘pornography’ and ‘erotica’ will provide a significant insight into how the field of sexually explicit writing

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83 Jaivin’s work as a translator and her support of refugee rights are, however, important. These suggest her acute awareness of some of the ways in which globalisation has reshaped Australian society.
has been gendered. Some feminists have found this distinction useful. Two such examples can be found in *Take Back the Night* (1980), an early collection of anti-pornography feminist writings. The first is Gloria Steinem’s tellingly-titled essay ‘Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference’. Steinem argues that pornography is focused on “domination and violence against women”, but erotica encompasses

… a mutually pleasurable, sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice … it doesn’t require us to identify with a conqueror or a victim. It is truly sensuous, and may give us a contagion of pleasure. (Steinem, 1980, p.37)

In her essay ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power’, Audre Lorde argues that “the erotic” can provide “a source of power and information” and “an internal sense of satisfaction” for women (Lorde, 1980, p.296). Lorde contrasts “the erotic” with pornography, which she argues “represents the suppression of true feeling” and “emphasizes sensation without feeling” (Ibid). Susan Hawthorne concurs with Steinem and Lorde when she argues that erotica is “response-centred”, whereas pornography relies upon what she describes as “relations of power” (Hawthorne, 1991, p.25). The term “relations of power” translates here to ‘misuse of power’.

Not all feminists have agreed that ‘erotica’ or ‘pornography’ can be easily distinguished from one another. Some have argued that the boundaries that separate them are in fact “hopelessly blurred” (Deirdre English, cited in Kappeler, 1986, p.36). Hawthorne does argue that eroticism is “response-centred”, but she also contends:

I think that what (feminists) have often assumed erotica to be gentle, sensual, etc … when what we should be focusing on is the response of the viewer/reader … something may be pornographic but not erotic, may be erotic but not pornographic, or it may be both simultaneously. (An erotic response to violent pornography is an example of the latter). (Hawthorne, 1991, pp.25-6; her emphasis)
Suzanne Kappeler criticises Steinem’s suggestion that erotica can be distinguished from pornography simply by “the quality of sex, the tenderness and attitudes of the partners involved…” (Kappeler, 1986, p.41). According to Kappeler, this suggestion implies that the reader or viewer can unproblematically “sort out the good sex from the bad, the non-violent from the violent …” (Ibid, p.39). Similarly, Jane Juffer argues: “Women’s erotica often claims to be using the literary form to capture the more complex nature of women’s desire …” (Juffer, 1998, p.106). This sets women’s erotica “apart from the crasser representations of pornography and its appeal to a quick masturbatory fix” (Juffer, 1998, p.106).

The gendering of sexually explicit writing is linked to the question of whether women write in a particular way. Some theorists have responded to this question with a ‘yes’. Luce Irigaray’s (1985) model of ‘écriture feminine’ is perhaps the most famous example of the argument that there is a distinctively feminine mode of writing. In her book Jamming the Machinery (1998), Alison Bartlett quotes Susan Hawthorne’s recollection that “in the late ‘70s there was a lot of discussion of the idea of ‘Is there a female aesthetic?’” (cited in Bartlett, 1998, p.224). Hawthorne also recalls telling “jokes about the phallic climactic thing of a man’s novel” where “he has one orgasm and the book ends” (Ibid). She contrasts this with a feminist vision of a “multi-orgasmic book” (Ibid). Rosie Scott suggests that words such as “cock, pussy, prick, screw and fuck” are “aggressive” “male” words (Scott, 1992, p.19). They do not belong in the “language about sex” that women writers are developing (Ibid, p.20).

The suggestions about gender, sex and writing that have just been cited are obvious. Male sexuality is “crass” and “masturbatory”, whereas female sexuality is “complex” and “erotic”. Male ‘pornography’ is a celebration of men’s power over women. This pornography (in its textual form) is filled with “aggressive” terms like “cock” and “pussy”. Conversely, female ‘erotica’ is based around egalitarianism, mutuality and trust. Erotica can foreground sexual arousal, both as a subject of representation and as a desired response for the reader, but this is not a key focus.

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84 The term ‘hardcore pornography’ has sometimes been applied to sexually explicit representations which depict S/M as well as physical and/or sexual violence (Williams, 1989).
Thus far, I have provided a standard overview of how ‘pornography’ and ‘erotica’ have been understood amongst feminists. These categories have been debated in less gender-specific – but nonetheless quite similar - terms in broader literary and cultural circles. Within the context of these debates, ‘pornography’ has been associated with a perceived lack of artistic merit. Pornography is mass-produced, widely circulated and – perhaps for these reasons – often thought to be consumed by an undiscriminating audience (Kipnis, 1993). These undiscriminating audiences are thought to absorb the messages that pornography contains, amongst them, the message that women will always be sexually available to men. This perception of ‘pornography’ and its consumers resembles a common perception of how ‘popular fiction’ is thought to be consumed by readers (Gelder, 2004, pp.137-8). ‘Popular fiction’ can encompass ‘genre’ work such as women’s romance writing (Sorensen and Greenwood, 1994, p.124). Popular fiction is frequently contrasted unfavourably with “big ‘L’ literature” (Ibid, p.122). This ‘big ‘L’ literature is canonised and taught in universities (Ibid, p.23). ‘Big ‘L’ literature’ is most commonly regarded (and not just within academic contexts) as “serious” fiction (Gelder and Salzman, 2009, p.95).

Similarly, ‘pornography’ has been contrasted unfavourably with ‘erotica’. ‘Erotica’ has been more closely associated with notions of artistic merit; it is thought to contain the intellectual and aesthetic complexity that ‘pornography’ lacks. This latter point is significant, and perhaps ironic, given that the label ‘erotica’ has so often been applied to women’s sexually explicit writing. As Janice Radway (1984) suggests in her study on romance fiction, literary genres aimed at a female readership have been traditionally thought to contain little or no artistic merit.

Classifying certain works as ‘erotica’ certainly appears to have been an effective marketing strategy, particularly amongst female consumers (Juffer, 1998, p.107). According to Jane Juffer, “there is still … considerable fear and embarrassment” for some women “about purchasing and/or renting” sexually explicit materials (Juffer, 2005, p.75). Suzie Bright, a well-known American commentator on sex, makes a similar point in a recollection about working in a San Francisco sex shop. Bright has claimed that she only used “the word ‘erotica’ … if (she) thought (customers) would be frightened of the word ‘pornography’” (cited in Juffer, 1998, p.123). This is even despite the fact that “the
genre of women’s erotica has grown … explicit” to the point where it is difficult to differentiate from material that is classified as ‘pornography’ (Ibid).

In *Eat Me*, Jaivin suggests that distinguishing between pornography and erotica is a futile exercise. She does this through opinions expressed by Helen. In a fax to a friend in Darwin, Helen remarks: “I’ve never understood the difference between erotica and pornography, have you? I mean, is erotica merely porn with literary pretensions? Or is something pornography if it is written by a man but erotica if penned by a woman?” (Jaivin, 1995, p.49). Helen – and, indeed, *Eat Me* as a whole – does not always concur with theorists such as Hawthorne and Kappeler on the question of what constitutes truly ‘feminist’ representations of sex. As with *Bad Girls*, Jaivin’s novel is at times quite hostile towards anti-pornography feminism.

Nevertheless, *Eat Me* does – for most part, at least – provide a vision of sexually explicit writing that would be conducive to a range of feminist perspectives. In this provocative and utopian vision, eating is a metaphor for the consumption of sexually explicit writing. Jaivin’s female protagonists read this writing and eat delectable food without any sense of shame and without being confined to the domestic sphere. Also, and more ambitiously, women’s sexually explicit fiction is seen as the potential source of a global ‘imagined community’ for feminists. Within this ‘imagined community’, the commercial success that this fiction has experienced is valued rather than ridiculed. Popularity does not equal intellectual or artistic poverty. Women who read or write sexually explicit fiction are not dismissed as suffering from false consciousness.

*Eat Me: Food, Sex, Feminism*

The relationship between food and sex has had many variations in popular culture. The title of Jaivin’s novel is a well-known slang term for oral sex. In films such as *9½ Weeks* (1986), novels such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989; also a 1992 film) and songs such as Madonna’s ‘Where Life Begins’ (1992), a metaphorical relationship is drawn between eating and copulation. Foods such as chocolate have been described as aphrodisiacs (O’Connor, 2006), and the term ‘gastroporn’ has been coined to describe the erotic presentation and/or fixation with food (Clee, 2005). The cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn argues: “Practices of preparing and eating food are … highly sensual and sometimes
sexual” (Probyn, 2000, p.59). According to Probyn, food and sex bring “together a cacophony of feelings, hopes, pleasures and worries” (Ibid, p.3).

Some female authors have used fiction to suggest how eating can provide “sensual pleasure” for women (Heller and Moran, 2003, p.8). Yet for women, eating has not always been associated pleasure. According to the Garden of Eden myth, “sin and death enter the world” when Eve greedily devoured the forbidden apple (Heller and Moran, 2003, p.1). In her book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (2000), Sarah Sceats points out: “Women’s bodies have the capacity to manufacture food for their infants which categorise them as feeders, and in Western culture women have traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others …” (Sceats, 2000, p.2). A number of female authors have used fiction to explore the ways in which women have been relegated to the roles of cook and provider of food (Ibid; Heller and Moran, 2003). Probyn (2000, pp. 125-47) has written about eating disorders and the sense of shame that some women have attached to food and eating. Carol Adams (2003) has explored the link between meat-eating and the sexual objectification of women.

There is a similarity between women’s ambivalent relationship to food and their relationship to sexually explicit writing. Earlier, I cited Juffer’s observation about how some women have found it awkward to purchase material that has been labelled ‘pornography’. Lyn Giles lends support to this observation in the introduction to her 1988 edited collection *Women’s Erotica*. In compiling this book, Giles reports that she found that “some (women) writers felt understandably awkward about … expressing intimate feelings and fantasies” (Giles, 1988, p.x). Bronwyn Levy expands on this point in her 1992 essay ‘Now What’s Erotic: Sexuality, Desire, and Australian Women’s Writing’.

That women, as opposed to men, may enjoy sex outside marriage or a committed relationship is still not culturally acceptable … But sexual politics will still cause difficulties with sex itself for relatively liberated women. A still largely masculine construction of women’s sexuality, of women’s bodies being posited as such by the “male gaze”, results in obstacles which women must negotiate if they wish to develop alternative accounts, and practices, of sexuality. (Levy, 1992, p.226)
Further to this, “women eat as well as cook” and have their own appetites to satisfy (Sceats, 2000, p.2). However, just as writing that is marketed towards women has frequently been regarded as trivial and unimportant, so too have women’s appetites. They have been considered secondary to the appetites (sexual and otherwise) of men.

A number of important issues are raised here. These include the issues of excess and restraint. Historically speaking, a woman’s ability to show restraint when eating has been perceived as feminine and “lady-like” (Tamar and Heller, 2003, p.23). Also, and again speaking historically, a woman’s ability to restrain her appetite has only been unsettling when it manifests itself in eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa.

Conversely, the woman who takes pleasure in eating can “easily” be viewed as “a monster of appetite” (Ibid, p.25). Similarly, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the woman who enjoys sex on her own terms has been stereotyped as a ‘bad girl’ or a ‘slut’.

Another important issue that is raised by this overview of women, food and sex is the domestic sphere. This is the sphere to which women have traditionally been relegated as sources of labour and emotional support for husbands and children. For Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, the emphasis on women and “domesticity” has created an “idea of womanhood” that “deemphasized female sexuality” (Ibid, 2003, p.22). According to this idea, the good woman is the one who stays at home and cooks for her loved ones; the “fallen woman” exists outside the home, and is associated with non-marital sex and other forms of vice (Ibid). The good woman is associated with safety and comfort; the “fallen woman” is associated with a combination of danger and eroticism. Similarly, and relating to a point I made earlier, conservatives have long argued that pornography “threatens the sanctity of the home” and, in particular, those “private sphere victims - women and children” (Juffer, 1998, p.9). Pornography exposes women and children to sexual predators. Pornography also exposes women to sex that is not aimed at reproduction and which does not take place within the context of a monogamous (heterosexual) relationship.

Juffer describes how some erotic texts written by women have attempted to “appeal to women as readers within the space of the home” (Ibid, p.134). She cites the

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85 The most famous exception to this rule was Queen Victoria, whose large frame “function(ed) both as a figure of feminine transgression and a figure of imperial plenty” (Munich, 2003, p.43).
example of fliers for the U.S. publishing company Doubleday. These fliers contain advertisements for “books on sex and relationships” (Ibid, p.135), as well as Doubleday’s book club. In the book club advertisements, the image of a dreamy-eyed woman clutching a book is juxtaposed with images in which she is engaged in other, predominantly home-based activities:

The book club fliers support the notion that women deserve to read as a break from everyday routines – reading is an “escape” from these routines, yet it keeps women located within the space of the home, serving to validate women’s labor and recognize the need for relief from it at the same time. (Ibid)

The Doubleday fliers lend support to the argument that “reading represents a form of somewhat subversive agency” (Ibid). Juffer argues that “when “escape” involves sexual fantasy and masturbation through the reading of erotica … reading carries an extra charge, one with the potential for momentarily claiming material spaces in the home as sites of embodied pleasure” (Ibid). Despite this “extra charge”, though, these advertisements still confine women (at least on the level of representation) to “the space of the home”. Reading might give them “a break” from their household chores, but it is to these chores that they must ultimately return.

Conversely, for much of Eat Me, Jaivin’s protagonists eat and have sex in public. In the opening conversation about Philippa’s novel, the protagonists are seated at a café in Darlinghurst. This location is humorously described as a kind of erotic menu, with its array of “(a)ctors, artists, sex workers … artists who were also sex workers, sex workers who pretended to be nurses, gays, straights, bis, straight acting gays, gay-acting straights …” (Jaivin, 1995, p.9). Later, Helen describes a sexual encounter with a truck driver in a parking lot outside the Big Merino (this is a large statue of a Merino sheep, and is a popular Australian tourist destination): “Cars whizzed past on the road … when someone drove into the parking lot to turn around, we found ourselves suddenly bathed in the beam of headlights …” (Jaivin, 1995, p.48). This encounter is itself transformed into a textual representation of sex: Helen describes it to a friend via a fax message.
My contention is not that having sex in public, reading about sex in public or eating food in public are inherently subversive activities. That would be far too simplistic. My contention is that the moments from *Eat Me* that I have described provide comic alternatives to the myth that such activities should be restricted to the domestic sphere. This restriction has particularly applied to women. In *Eat Me*, the public sphere is a site of vice, and vice is linked – indeed, is portrayed as a key – to female pleasure and strength. Jaivin’s female protagonists are not condemned for being “greedy and lustful” and refusing to embrace their socially-assigned role of “moral guide within the home” (Heller and Moran, 2003, p.22).

At no point do Jaivin’s protagonists view food or sex “as forbidden knowledge, as nurturance, as disordered …” (Ibid, p.3). The novel opens and closes with these women eating while they discuss Philippa’s literary output. Early in the text, Philippa remarks that “they’re … supposed to be pretty good for you …” (Jaivin, 1995, p.9). “They” refers to the muffin that Philippa is devouring and also the excerpt of her novel that she has been reading to her friends (I will discuss this excerpt at greater length soon). Helen describes the fiction and the food they enjoy as being “empowering”, this being a term she jokingly claims to have learned as an academic feminist where “it comes with the turf” (Ibid, p.10).

Further to this, for the women in *Eat Me*, women’s sexually explicit literature can help bring about a sense of ‘imagined community’. As mentioned in Chapter One, Benedict Anderson focused on the way in which the printed text has helped construct a sense of “national consciousness” (Anderson, 1983, p.37). Anderson paid little attention to feminist insights. Radway engages with feminist theory when she examines what might be regarded as an ‘imagined community’ of women readers. Radway interviewed women in a small midwestern American town who were avid readers of romance novels. These women were mostly married with families, and thus are quite different to the single and childless women depicted in *Eat Me*. These women patronised a chain bookshop in which one female employee had developed a reputation for recommending romance fiction to female consumers. This fiction often had conservative gender politics, yet many of Radway’s interviewees claimed that it provided them with an “emotional release” from “their roles as wives and mothers” (Radway, 1984, p.95). By reading
In *Eat Me*, as in Radway’s text, the feminist reading community that Jaivin portrays is apparently limited in terms of its geographical scope. Jaivin’s narrative unfolds almost exclusively in Sydney’s inner eastern suburbs. Nevertheless, Helen’s fax to her friend in Darwin and the subsequent publication of the ‘real-life’ Philippa’s book ‘Eat Me’ suggest this community has the potential to span across Australia. The publication of Jaivin’s novel *Eat Me* within and outside Australia, in turn, suggests that this novel has itself intervened within a more ‘global’ reading community.

The metaphor of a global feminist reading community has some basis. As I have already argued, the printed text has played a vital role in transporting feminism within and between countries. This metaphor is certainly utopian, as Cynthia Huff suggests in her essay ‘Towards a Geography of Women’s Life Writing and Imagined Communities’ (2005).

As scholars from around the world began to examine the premises of feminist theories, the gaps became increasingly clear. Women were not a bounded group with a stable identity across continents, public and personal histories, and ethnic and racial positions. (Huff, 2005, p.6)

This relates to debates about the “politics of difference” in feminism. Women *as a social group* might encounter sexism. Nevertheless, and this is a point that I have made on several occasions already in this thesis, there has been an increased recognition amongst feminists that women are not all somehow united because they are women. As Susan Sheridan acknowledges, “the dream of a common language” amongst women has been shown to be just that – a dream (Sheridan, 1994, p.151).

Nevertheless, Huff argues that reading and writing can at least enable feminists to listen to and learn from each others’ “voices” (Huff, 2005, p.7). The “voices” in *Eat Me* are apparently those of white, Anglo-Australian women; Jaivin herself is Jewish, of American descent (Gambotto, 1997). These women are mostly heterosexual, though Philippa is revealed to be a lesbian (or bisexual) in the final pages (Jaivin, 1995, pp. 214-
Thus, this novel does not represent – and nor does it claim to represent - a global feminist reading community. What *Eat Me* does is acknowledge that sexually explicit fiction can present one source of community between feminists. Within this ‘imagined community’, feminists can read each other’s sexually explicit fiction. Feminists can also debate issues pertaining to sex, gender and literary representation with one another.

Related to the last point, Jaivin acknowledges that this fiction was “all the rage” in the mid-1990s (Ibid, p.131). There is nothing particularly radical about female consumerism, but this is not the point Jaivin is making. According to Jaivin, there is a genuine demand amongst women for texts such as *Eat Me*. This demand cannot be simply dismissed as frivolous titillation or as proof that readers (particularly women readers) are suffering from false consciousness. In her critique of “mass culture studies”, Janice Radway suggests that such accusations are deeply problematic (Radway, 1984, p.5).

In such studies, the critic typically selects a particular popular genre for analysis in the hope of generating some conclusions about the ideological function of the genre upon the people who read it … The actual process of interpretation is itself a translation whereby the critic rereads the text’s manifest content as a blind or mask concealing the true ideological message of the work. (Ibid, pp.5-6)

According to this analysis, popular fiction is read solely for “entertainment” (Gelder, 2004, p.1). Popular fiction texts are vehicles for brainwashing the unthinking and unsuspecting masses. The literary critic is the one who recognises the manipulative nature and the intellectual/artistic deficiencies of these texts. Once again, “big ‘L’ Literature” retains its position as the most sophisticated and deserving source of reading.

In *Eat Me*, Jaivin’s characters are aware of feminist perspectives on sexually explicit fiction. Compare this with the romance fiction fans interviewed by Radway. These fans were intelligent and discerning readers, but they did not engage with feminism in any meaningful way. Jaivin’s protagonists are aware that women writers are “intervening in a male-dominated field” when they produce sexually explicit fiction. Also, these protagonists acknowledge that women who consume sexually explicit fiction
cannot simply be dismissed as dupes or perpetrators of patriarchal oppression. In her fax about the Big Merino encounter, Helen asks rhetorically:

… if it’s pornographic, do you think it proves or disproves (the US feminist) Robin Morgan’s thesis that if rape is the practice, pornography is the theory? What happens when we women write the pornography? Can we rape ourselves? (Jaivin, 1995, p.49).

Helen’s reference to Morgan’s now-infamous argument is not arbitrary. This reference is important because it suggests how Eat Me intervenes in feminist debates not only about pornography, but also about ‘dominance-submission sexuality’.

In the following section, I will consider how Jaivin’s novel endorses the kind of ‘pro-sex’ feminist line which Lumby championed in Bad Girls. I ask: to what extent does Eat Me dismiss the insights of anti-pornography feminists as outdated and puritanical? I ask also, how might these insights enrich our political understanding of sexually explicit fiction writing? I ask these questions with particular reference to the issue of fantasy. Jaivin frames her protagonists’ sexual encounters as female fantasies, and suggests that these fantasies can have enormous political advantages for feminists. This raises a third question that I will explore: How can fantasies (particularly sexual fantasies) challenge and/or simply reflect sexism?

**Fantasy and ‘Dominance-Submission Sexuality’**

In the Introduction to Moments of Desire, Susan Hawthorne and Jenny Pausacker announce that their collection does not endorse “submission and dominance” or “the structural power differences between men and women” (Hawthorne and Pausacker, 1989, p.xi). Hawthorne and Pausacker voice a familiar feminist opposition to what I will call ‘dominance-submission sexuality’. The best-known expression of this sexuality is S/M, though the term ‘dominance-submission sexuality’ can encompass other sexual practices that involve a power imbalance (real or perceived) between partners. Hawthorne has

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86 Morgan’s actual line was: “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” (cited in Lumby, 1997a, p.98).
Elsewhere argued that dominance-submission sexuality in any form involves “objectification, humiliation and hatred” (Hawthorne, 1991, p.28). For Hawthorne and other feminists, this sexuality always has its genesis in female subjugation. This is true even when women are not involved, for example, in gay male S/M (Ibid; and see also Evans, 1982; Linden, 1982).

Not all feminists have shared these views. In her review of Moments of Desire, Jyanni Steffensen argues against “conflating representations of Dominance/Submission with violence because of fear and/or ignorance” (Steffensen, 1989, p.31).

Dominance/Submission is a code through which sexuality might be expressed … Perhaps what we need are theories of sexuality and theories of violence that sometimes overlap, but are by no means mutually inclusive. (Ibid)

Levy concurs with Steffensen when she accuses Hawthorne and Pausacker’s collection of portraying “non-threatening ‘vanilla’ sex” as the “standard for female sexuality” (Levy, 1992, p.232). According to this feminist perspective, women are seen as “less aggressive, more nurturing, and morally superior to men” (Ibid). This perspective effectively threatens to deny the existence of female sexual assertiveness, and is thus more conservative than radical.

Further similarities between anti-S/M feminists and the New Right are suggested in a 1980 essay by Pat/Patrick Califia. Califia argues that certain feminists have distorted language commonly used by S/M practitioners to make it resemble the language of oppression:

It is difficult to discuss S/M in feminist terms because some of the slang S/M people use to talk about sexuality has been appropriated by feminist propagandists. Terms like roles, masochism, bondage, dominance and submission have become buzzwords. In a feminist context, their meanings differ sharply from their significance to S/M people. (Califia, 1994, p.166)
For Califia, these feminists are little different in their politics to the New Right. Indeed, these feminists may belong to the New Right. She describes anti-S/M and anti-pornography feminists as comprising a “moralistic force” that is concerned with “interpreting the sexual behaviour of other people according to their own value system” (Ibid).

Some feminists who have been supportive of dominance-submission sexuality have drawn on their own experiences in S/M communities (Calafia is a prime example).87

A number of pro-S/M feminists have also drawn liberally from poststructuralist understandings of sex, power and subversion. These include Foucault’s argument that S/M “differs from social power … it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid” (cited in Sullivan, 1997b, p.284).88 According to Foucault, sexual practices involving dominance and submission are not “demeaning” (cited in Foucault and O’Higgins, 1983, p.20). As he argued, “the idea SM is related to a deep violence … is stupid” (cited in Sullivan, 1997b, p.284). In S/M, “there are roles, but everyone knows very well that these roles can be reversed … It is an acting out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure” (cited in Ibid). For example, the U.S. philosopher Karmen MacKendrick has argued that S/M is a “delight against moral norms, a delight in subversion” (MacKendrick, 1998, p.34).

The terms ‘dominance-submission sexuality’ and ‘pornography’ do not refer to the same thing. Nevertheless, this is not the impression that is created when reviewing the feminist debates on these topics. These debates unfolded at roughly the same time. They involved many of the same participants, and their arguments frequently overlapped. In her critique of S/M, for example, Hawthorne argues that “(p)ornography is about the power of one group of people over another – in a patriarchy that means the power of men over women” (Hawthorne, 1991, p.25). Hawthorne uses the term “pornographic relationship” to describe “one in which a woman (or a black person, or some ‘other’) is commodified, exploited, abused or reduced to an object, and sometimes killed” (Ibid).

87 Scholarly work on S/M has tended to focus on the more ‘theatrical’ forms this takes, for example, performances in S/M clubs. This theatrical S/M is not explored in either Eat Me or The River Ophelia, which investigate some of the ways that dominance-submission sexuality is played out generally in ‘everyday life’.

88 Foucault’s experience as an S/M practitioner has been well-documented (Miller, 1993).
Feminists such as Steffensen and Levy do not deny that pornography can depict S/M and power imbalances. Nevertheless, they suggest that S/M, power imbalances and pornography do not always perpetuate women’s oppression.

This brings us to the second way of reading the eating-sex metaphor in *Eat Me*. According to this reading, the enthusiastic consumption of food undertaken by Jaivin’s protagonists serves as a metaphor for the way they treat their male partners. Throughout the novel, these women wield varying degrees of sexual dominance over men – sometimes with the aid of food. *Eat Me* opens with an excerpt from Philippa’s novel. This excerpt takes place in a supermarket, and chronicles the exploits of ‘Ava’, a femme fatale who actively pursues a store detective named ‘Adam’.

He scowled as he bent down, arse to her, balancing with his hands against the shelf with the fruit.

‘Give me that cucumber’.

Turning his head, he watched as Ava lubricated it in her vagina. Slowly, she insinuated it up his arse. He groaned and twisted with pain and pleasure.

(Jaivin, 1995, p.6)

Helen has a fling with a male student, Marc, whom she describes as “gooey egg on toast” (Ibid, p.70). According to Helen, this meal is “not too heavy or complicated” (Ibid). Elsewhere, Helen describes Marc as “one of those politically correct and attractive male students who always pop up in women’s studies courses – you can imagine the type” (Ibid, p.27). At a dinner party, Chantal describes her night with a male prostitute. Chantal describes the prostitute as: “Black American. Sailor type … As large as they come … not averse to tongue kissing or a bit of light S&M. With me on top” (Ibid, p.142). Chantal is “on top” during sex, and describes the “dollop of cream” on the “dark plum pudding” of the prostitute’s erect penis (Ibid, p.148).

It would be easy to argue that *Eat Me* simply relies on a subversion of a subject-object/masculine-feminine hierarchy. This kind of reading is simplistic on a number of levels. Firstly, it does not necessarily take into account the fact that *Eat Me* is a critique of representation; the novel is not only concerned with subverting these representations.
Secondly, this reading glosses over the complex question of fantasy. The term ‘fantasy’ is mentioned repeatedly throughout *Eat Me*. The almost surrealistic sexual acts that Jaivin describes are more easily classified as sexual fantasies than as instances of literary realism.

What have feminists been saying about ‘fantasy’? A useful place to start answering this question is Judith Butler’s essay ‘The Force of Fantasy’ (1990). Butler’s essay is a response to anti-pornography feminism and the concurrent New Right attacks on gay and lesbian artists in America during the late 1980s and early 1990s (I described these attacks briefly in the previous chapter). Butler takes as her own starting point the work of psychoanalytic theorists Jean Laplanche and J.-B Pontalis. These theorists argued that “*fantasy constitutes a dimension of the real*, what they refer to as ‘psychic reality’” (Butler, 1990a, p.108; her emphasis). Butler elaborates on this definition in an argument that (with its emphasis on repetition) closely resembles her model of gender performativity:

> Fantasy postures as the real, it establishes the real through a repeated and persistent posturing, but it also contains the possibility of suspending and interrogating the ontological claim itself, of reviewing its own productions, as it were, and contesting their claim to the real. (Ibid)

According to Butler, fantasy has provided feminists with a way of “rethinking futurity”—that is, imagining how the world would look without a power imbalance between women and men (Ibid, p.105). Fantasy has helped feminists to answer the question: “what is it that passes as the real, that qualifies the extent or domain of “reality”? (Ibid, p.106). In order to bring about social change, one must first identify what does and does not count as ‘reality’ (see Frye, 1983).

Butler criticises anti-pornography feminists for “establish(ing) a logical or causal continuum among fantasy, representation and action” (Butler, 1990a, p.106). According to these feminists, fantasy is “that which produces and is produced by representations and which, then, makes possible and enacts precisely the referent of that representation” (Ibid). Butler argues that, within the terms of this argument, “the real is positioned both
before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real” (Ibid).

Conversely, Butler suggests that attempts to prohibit certain material can inadvertently attribute this material with the very messages it seeks to outlaw: “…the very rhetoric by which certain erotic acts or relations are prohibited invariably eroticizes that prohibition” (Ibid). This is not dissimilar to an argument that Lumby would make seven years later in *Bad Girls*. Butler accuses anti-pornography feminists of assuming that fantasy requires “identification with a single position” (Ibid, p.109). According to these feminists, women will always identify with the position of victim and men will always identify with the position of aggressor. Butler, conversely, argues that “the identification is distributed amongst the various elements of the (fantasy) scene” (Ibid). Her contention is that “although we might wish to think… that there is an “I” who has or cultivates its fantasy with some measure of mastery and possession, that “I” is always already undone by precisely that which it claims to master” (Ibid, p.110).

Butler’s emphasis on the unpredictable, shifting nature of fantasy and identification has appeared in much feminist work on visual culture. This includes a considerable body of psychoanalytic feminist film criticism (see McCabe, 2004, pp.88-111). Questions of fantasy and identification have also been central to feminist debates on pornography. *Bad Girls* is certainly evidence of this. Through her readings of certain media imagery, Lumby suggests that female spectators do not always identify with a passive/feminine image. Female spectators can transform even apparently sexist representations of women into fantasies of female sexual empowerment.

It is instructive to compare this argument about fantasy, identification and representation with the one advanced by Suzanne Kappeler in her book *The Pornography of Representation* (1986). Kappeler concurs with the basic point that fantasy and representation have their genesis in reality. Fantasies “do not simply exist on canvas, in books, on photographic paper or on screens …” (Kappeler, 1986, p.3). Nevertheless, Kappeler argues that “there is a dialectical relationship between representational practices which construct sexuality, and actual sexual practices, each informing the other” (Ibid, p.2). Her concern is not with how fantasy or representation can invite shifting identifications or how they can enable a rethinking of certain sexual practices. Kappeler
is instead concerned with how certain representations (especially ‘pornographic’ representations that are marketed towards heterosexual men) reinforce pre-existing gender stereotypes.

In an interview with the Melbourne University student magazine *Farrago* in 2001, Jaivin was asked whether “erotica (is) always … about the empowered/disempowered dichotomy” (Nolan, 2001, p.23). Jaivin responded that “a lot of the charge in sexual descriptions … comes from power play” (cited in Ibid). Jaivin favourably contrasts this opinion with the feminist argument that “writing sex that wasn’t about power … was the proper way to do it” (cited in Ibid). Jaivin mentions the responses of male readers to the descriptions of men being sexually disempowered by women in *Eat Me*:

> Some men … found it really flattering to be made out to be sex objects. To be treated as things you can look at and then go fuck if you want to. Because you can’t disempower men that easily. I think the man who complained about it don’t realise that it would take a hell of a lot more to disempower men. (cited in Ibid)

These remarks echo Butler’s argument that sexual fantasies can offer a valuable way of rethinking existing social relations. Jaivin does acknowledge that there has been an unequal balance of power between the sexes, and that it is significantly more difficult for women to “disempower” men and portray them as “sex objects”. Jaivin’s reference to male readers who “found it really flattering to be … treated as things you can look at and then go fuck if you want to” does suggest that identifications with particular sexual positions are not always not gendered in traditional ways. *Eat Me* is not a novel in which identification is structured along familiar and heterosexist “active/passive, male/female dichotomies” (McCabe, 2004, p.91). In *Eat Me*, ‘active’ and ‘passive’ are not inherently tied to ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies at all; the opposite is seen as being true.

Indeed, the sexual episodes described throughout Jaivin’s novel can be read as parodying myths about the dangers of female sexuality. The excerpt set in the supermarket is perhaps most obviously a parody of the ‘Garden of Eden’ myth. In that myth, Eve’s appetite had devastating ramifications for humankind. In *Eat Me*, the
voracious appetite (sexual and otherwise) of the fictional Ava helps her ensnare Adam.
The name ‘Ava’ is also an obvious reference to the film star Ava Gardner, who famously portrayed a femme fatale in *The Killers* (1946). On one level, Jaivin may be seen as reclaiming the figure of the femme fatale as a positive representation of a “triumphantly active” woman (Stables, 1998, p.179). The cucumber that Ava wields is an obvious and jokey reference to the femme fatale’s sexuality, which has often been described as being ‘phallic’ in nature (Kaplan, 1998). 89

Furthermore, and to state the obvious: equating men and male bodies with food is a variation on the way in which women’s bodies have been “commodified” (to use Hawthorne’s term) within pornography and popular culture. Food may be a source of sustenance and enjoyment, but food is also a commodity - something that can be bought and sold. The same can be said of print texts, be they literary or otherwise. *Eat Me* is thus not only about women who fantasise about sexually dominating men. Jaivin’s novel is also about men being transformed into lustful objects of exchange. Some male and female readers may find this sexualisation of men to be arousing or amusing, others may not. Hawthorne and Pausacker point out that what one reader may find “erotic” may leave “another reader unmoved” (Hawthorne and Pausacker, 1989, p.xi).

The politics of humour are important here. According to Jaivin, some readers have responded to *Eat Me* with the attitude that “you can’t have humour with erotica. One cuts the other out” (cited in Nolan, 2001, p.22). Laura Kipnis suggests a reason for this in her book *Ecstasy Unlimited* (1993). Kipnis advances her argument with specific reference to Freud’s work on jokes:

Whereas both men and women are subject to sexual inhibition or repression, apparently upper-class women are more seriously affected in the Freudian world, and dirty jokes thus function as a sign for both sexual difference … and class difference. So apparently, if it weren’t for women’s lack of sexual willingness and class refinement the joke would not be a joke, but a proposition … (Kipnis, 1993, p.229)

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89 Since the 1980s, a sub-genre of Australian women’s crime fiction has sought to subvert the sexism of traditional detective and noir narratives (McKemmish, 1993).
‘Erotica’ is a ‘high-brow’ genre that is frequently marketed towards women. Humour would thus seem unsuited to this genre. “Obscene humour” can be sexist, but it can also potentially disrupt notions of female sexual repression and class refinement (Ibid, p.231). This humour can also disrupt certain stereotypes of male power. In the Big Merino sexual encounter, for example, the truck driver – a quintessential representation of a certain rugged Anglo-Australian masculinity – becomes a kind of tourist attraction. His sexual prowess, and not the oversized Merino sheep, becomes the source of spectacle.

Thus, it is insufficient to argue that dominance submission sexuality – whether it involves a man sexually dominating a woman, or (in the case of Eat Me) a woman sexually dominating a man – is inherently sexist. A more nuanced approach to dominance-submission sexuality is required. In The Pornography of Meat (2003), Carol Adams argues: “Pleasurable consumption of consumable beings is the dominant perspective of our culture” (Adams, 2003, p.13). According to Adams: “Before someone can be consumed or used, she has to be seen as consumable, usable, as a something instead of a someone” (Ibid, p.14; her emphasis). Adams contends that just as viewing animals as “a piece of meat” makes it easier to kill and eat them, so too does viewing a woman in this way make it easier for men to consume pornographic images of women (Ibid, p.13). Adams clearly views meat-eating as being coterminous with the oppression of women and only women. Men are almost always the beholders of the gaze in her analysis. Nevertheless, her remarks about seeing “someone” as “consumable … as a something” are useful for my argument. Adams’ underlying suggestion is that portraying another human being – female or male – as equivalent to an object (in this case, a piece of food) threatens to rid them of a sense of subjectivity.

The image of man-as-sexual object/product that is depicted in Eat Me is subversive to the extent that men have not traditionally been represented in such a manner, at least not in heterosexual popular culture. However, this political subversiveness has its limitations. Sexually objectifying men does not suggest what sex without a gendered power imbalance – or at least the suggestion of a gendered power imbalance – would be like. 

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90 Kipnis’ analysis of pornography focuses on Hustler, a magazine whose readership she concedes is “primarily male” (Ibid, p.230).
91 In gay male pornography, men are frequently depicted in positions of sexual submission (see Burger, 1995).
imbalance - would resemble. Kappeler makes a similar point when she refers to the attitude that “it’s alright to be a sex object since, look, the men over there are learning to be sex objects too!” (Kappeler, 1986, p.49). This attitude can be witnessed in statements such as the following one by the British feminist Suzanne Moore: “After years of women complaining about the objectification of their bodies, we find ourselves confronted with the male body on display: cut up, close up and oh! so tastefully lit” (Moore, 1988, p. 45). These statements are problematic, Kappeler argues, because “(i)n the gender equality envisaged by the feminist critique of patriarchy, exploitation of and supremacy over one gender by the other would no longer be possible; it would mean … the end of exploitation, not ‘equal exploitation’” (Kappeler, 1986, p.50).

Conversely, in her *Farrago* interview, Jaivin suggests that sex which is not about “power” – or, rather, power hierarchies - has no “erotic charge”. In that interview, she very explicitly distances herself from feminist visions of sexual egalitarianism. These, she suggest, have become outmoded. Throughout *Eat Me*, Jaivin inadvertently gives support to Sheila Jeffreys’ argument that gender hierarchy can be replaced by other forms of hierarchy in relationships. The male sexual partners described in the aforementioned scenarios are marked as ‘subordinate’ to the ‘dominant’ female protagonists. Marc, for instance, is Helen’s much-younger student. This scenario of a male student-female teacher sexual relationship is ripe for feminist investigation. As Jane Gallop argues, “relations between male teachers and female students are sexualized as harassment” (Gallop, 1994, p.3). Relationships between male students and female teachers cannot so easily be “made to fit the harassment case” (Ibid).

However, Jaivin echoes Garner in suggesting that “political correctness” is preventing women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure. Helen informs a colleague that “the political correctness vibe on campus now makes it very hard for anyone to make a move” (Jaivin, 1995a, p.48). Mark is described as “politically correct”, “gooey” and typical of the kind of male student who enrolls in Women’s Studies courses. Mark’s masculinity (or lack thereof) is a direct contrast to the more stereotypical masculinity of the Big Merino

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92 Gallop does not deny the existence of sexual harassment; her argument is that not all sexual relationships between students and teachers can be regarded as sexual harassment. This is a provocative argument, and raises the question of whether or not the teacher has abused his/her professional boundaries when they become sexually involved with a student.
truck driver – even if the truck driver’s sexuality is glorified to ridiculous proportions. In other words, Mark is ‘feminised’.

Similarly, Chantal’s sexual consort is a black male prostitute. Here, Jaivin invokes two highly charged sexual and racial stereotypes. The first is the stereotype of the black male as sexually voracious. According to Kobena Mercer (1997), this stereotype is essentially as a product of a white and male-supremacist imaginary. Mercer rightly argues that using ‘race’ simply to give “further credence to the anti-pornography argument” is deeply problematic (Ibid, p.162). He argues that this is done by Kappeler, who uses the image of a “mutilated, tortured” black man as representative of what happens to all women in pornography (Ibid). Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate Chantal’s sexual fantasy from the racist stereotype that I have mentioned. Would the humour or erotic frisson of Chantal’s encounter remain if her consort was not black?

The second stereotype which Jaivin invokes in her description of Chantal’s sexual escapade is that of the prostitute as a figure of sexual and economic exploitation. This stereotype has been disputed by some feminists (see Bell, 1994), though it remains popular amongst others. The latter group includes Sheila Jeffreys, as I suggested in Chapter Three. In Eat Me, as in the discourse of anti-prostitution feminists, the prostitute (albeit here a male prostitute) becomes the passive object of erotic pleasure. For anti-prostitution feminists, the prostitute is always victimised and objectified by her male clients. In Eat Me, the male prostitute is simply a source of pleasure for his female client. Chantal purchases him for her own sexual gratification; there is nothing to suggest his own subjectivity, his own humanity.

The figure of the femme fatale has been appropriated by feminists as a symbol of female sexual empowerment. Kate Stables argues that the particularly sexually aggressive and assertive femme fatale of 1990s films such as The Last Seduction (1994) served as proof that the “status of patriarchy” in the late twentieth century was becoming “strained” (Stables, 1998, p.179). Stables contends that the 1990s femme fatale “effortlessly outperforms the hero in every way” and is not punished for doing this (Ibid, p.168). Nevertheless, Stable does not deny the politically fraught history of the femme fatale. I discussed this history briefly in Chapter Two.
The femme fatale figure of the male imaginary imaged forth males’ terror of, but fascinated interest in, that bleeding wound: the play of desire and fear hovered around the castration that might happen if males followed their desire for the beautiful sexual and powerful woman. What many named the phallicisation of these women aimed to reduce male fear of their castration – their own bleeding wound so as to permit fulfilment of the sexual desire the woman evoked. (Ibid, pp.9-10)

In *Eat Me*, ‘Ava’ is infinitely more jokey and carnivalesque\(^\text{93}\) than femmes fatale such as the one played by Ava Gardner in *The Killers*. Jaivin’s ‘Ava’ cannot be read in any simple way as a receptacle of male anxieties about castration or female sexuality. She objectifies ‘Adam’, and is not ‘punished’ for her sexual transgressions (as the femme fatale of classic noir cinema often was). Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how the humour or the eroticism of the supermarket sexual encounter would work without a notion of female lack – that is, the lack of a penis. This encounter may even be read as implicitly (and unintentionally) reinforcing the cultural power attributed to the phallus. More specifically: ‘Ava’ requires a penis-substitute (albeit a deliberately farcical one) in order to exert power over a man.

Anti-pornography feminist insights about the sexual politics of representation are portrayed throughout *Eat Me* as being out-of-touch with contemporary feminism. The character Helen is used to voice the opinion that anti-pornography arguments are rapidly losing popularity and credibility in feminist circles. Consider this excerpt from a conversation between Helen and Philippa regarding the latter’s sexually explicit fiction:

‘Helen.’ Philippa suddenly looked anxious. ‘You’re up on these things. What’s the latest line on pornography among feminists? I’m a bit worried. Think they’ll take a dim view of the story?

‘Oh, look, it’s not that clear really,’ Helen answered. ‘Some feminists still maintain that all pornography is representational violence against women. But I

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\(^\text{93}\) The best-known feminist analysis of ‘the carnivalesque’ is Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* (1995).
think that kind of line can hardly apply to women’s erotica. Particularly when it involves a woman stuffing a Lebanese cucumber up a man’s arse. (Ibid, p.10)

As suggested in the previous chapter, there are many problems with trying to prove the existence of a direct correlation between sexually explicit material and ‘real-life’ sexual violence. Nevertheless, anti-pornography feminists have not only been concerned with doing this. These feminists have also attempted to identify what certain sexually explicit representations say about men, women and sex. Feminists such as Kappeler and Hawthorne have investigated how certain representations reproduce long-standing stereotypes about male and female sexuality. These representations may not provoke rape per se, but neither do they benefit women’s social or political status.

In *Eat Me*, anti-pornography feminism is reduced to a single and oft-cited quote: “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice”. For Jaivin, feminists who oppose pornography present a threat to freedom of sexual expression, fictional and otherwise. This argument is not completely invalid. In the previous chapter, I described how various anti-pornography feminist arguments have been appropriated by the New Right. In America, *Eat Me* was banned from some public libraries (‘Censorship Watch’, 2003). The book suffered a fate not dissimilar to that which many feminist, gay and lesbian texts suffered at the hands of Canadian customs in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, for Jaivin, as for Butler, Robin Morgan’s famous statement serves as evidence that anti-pornography feminists see “representation” as “the moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real”. Jaivin contrasts this rigid and victim-focused feminism with the perspective on sexually explicit representation which she takes throughout her text. According to this view, one should not take a “dim view” of sexually explicit representations of any kind – and particularly when they are produced by women. These representations are merely reflections of a woman’s fantasies, and fantasies challenge (rather than endorse or perpetuate) unequal social relations.

I have argued that *Eat Me* presents a complex treatise on women and sexually explicit literary representations. Jaivin concurs with a range of feminists that women can be empowered by producing and consuming their own sexually explicit fiction. Jaivin even
suggests that sexually explicit women’s fiction writing can potentially function as the source of an ‘Australian’ – and indeed a ‘global’ – feminist reading community. However, the conflation of eating and sex in Eat Me can also be read as a metaphor for the treatment of men as pieces of “meat” who/that are good to “look at and fuck”. Jaivin frames these representations of men in terms of female sexual fantasies, and suggests that such fantasies can contest (rather than simply reflect) sexism. Jaivin contrasts her sexual politics with what she portrays as a victim-fixated and increasingly outmoded anti-pornography feminism. In doing this, I have argued that Eat Me glosses over the important insights that feminists such as Suzanne Kappeler have made about how fantasies and representations reinforce as well as subvert sexist sexual relations. Jaivin also invokes the kind of generation conflict between ‘sex-positive’ and anti-pornography feminists that we encountered in Bad Girls.
Chapter Six
“Salo in Darlo”: The River Ophelia And The (Re)Writing of Female Masochism and Sexual Consent

Was she asking for it?
Was she asking nice?
Yeah, she was asking for it
Did she ask you twice?
(Hole, ‘Asking for It’)

Justine never knew the rules
(The Smashing Pumpkins, ‘1979’)

The River Ophelia has commonly been read as a realistic depiction of young people and sex in the 1990s. Justine Ettler herself has concurred on several occasions with this reading. Yet I argue that classifying The River Ophelia as either a realist novel or as a novel about generations reveals little about the text’s complex politics. On a broad level, Ettler’s novel can be read as an ‘Australian’ intervention into ‘overseas’ literary movements and political debates. More specifically, The River Ophelia can be read as a parodic feminist re-writing of male-authored texts, and also an intervention into feminist debates about female masochism and sexual consent. Throughout the novel, Ettler explores the hypocritical way in which sadism (defined here as the interlinking of sex and violence) is both condemned and condoned by a voyeuristic public. I argue that Ettler mobilises rather than polarises a number of feminist perspectives on the issues she explores.

The Marketing and Critical Reception of The River Ophelia

Ettler’s novel received considerable coverage when it was published by Picador in 1995. This coverage unfolded in journals such as Hecate and the magazines Who Weekly and the Australian Rolling Stone. For many critics, The River Ophelia was a prime example of a genre that was variously referred to as ‘grunge literature’ and ‘dirty realism’ (Dawson, 1997; Syson, 1996). Other texts that have been aligned with this genre included Andrew McGahan’s Praise (1992), Leonie Stevens’ Nature Strip (1994), Christos
Tsiolkas’ *Loaded* (1995) and - on some occasions – *Eat Me* (Gelder and Salzman, 2009, p.206). These texts featured protagonists who were in the same age groups as their authors (late twenties to early thirties), and whose lives were characterised by what one reporter luridly described as “sleaze, violence, sex, drugs, and lives empty of values” (Murray Waldren, cited in Henderson and Rowlands, 1996, p.3). Ettler was described as “the new lit brat” (Greenwood, 1995, p.7) and “Sydney’s Empress of Grunge” (Anderson, 1995, p.50).

Critics who read *The River Ophelia* as a realist novel about young people and their sexual mores were not entirely misguided. Ettler and her publishers certainly encouraged this kind of reading. According to the public relations material for *The River Ophelia*, the novel was “inspired by (Ettler’s) misspent youth … and involves lots of drug taking, pool playing and kinky sex” (cited in Ettler, 1996b). Ettler claimed that her novel’s perspective on sex was particularly relevant to ‘GenX’ readers: “It’s definitely a post-baby boomer sensibility … I mean, who believes in ideologically sound sex anymore?” (cited in Nicholls, 1995, p.70). In another interview, Ettler hinted that *The River Ophelia*’s intertextuality would appeal to a “new readership … the kind of people who will buy a CD, go to a rock concert, play with their computer – and read a book” (cited in Greenwood, 1995, p.7).

Similarly, Ettler and her publishers suggested at different times that *The River Ophelia* might be autobiographical. Sometimes this suggestion was made playfully, other times with an apparent earnestness. As mentioned, the public relations material for Ettler’s novel cites the author’s teenage years as “inspiration” for the text. The chief protagonist is named ‘Justine’, and she (as with Ettler) was also a literary studies student living in inner-city Sydney (Paviour, 1995). Ettler has been quoted as saying: “I’ve been down the terrible pathway of despair depicted in *The River Ophelia* … I had a real sense of hopelessness about my life” (cited in Morisset, 1996). In her *Who Weekly* interview, she mused: “Perhaps I want the reader to think, ‘Is it all true’?” (cited in Paviour, 1995, p.54).

Just as the spectre of ‘Generation X’ was invoked in the marketing and critical reception of *The River Ophelia*, so too was the broader spectre of generational conflict. This conflict was occasionally framed in feminist terms. Consider the way that Ettler
distances herself from what she calls “ideologically sound sex”. The term “ideologically sound sex” invokes the kind of egalitarian desire promoted by theorists such as Sheila Jeffreys. Elsewhere, Ettler remarked: “For a previous generation, sex was either pornographic or politically correct …” (Ettler, 1995d, p.113). Consider also Susan Lever’s argument that *The River Ophelia* heralds a moment in which Australian women’s fiction has become depoliticised: “… the experiment and political struggle is over, and it is time to indulge in romantic fantasy” (Lever, 2000, p. 146). This argument echoes Jeffreys’ suggestion that young women at the end of the twentieth century were more interested in abstract intellectual pursuits than grassroots feminist activism.

Elsewhere, there was the suggestion of a “conflict between literary generations” (Leishman, 1999). Don Anderson opens his review of *The River Ophelia* with the line: “To a man in his mid-fifties, this novel by a woman in her late twenties is deeply shocking” (Anderson, 1995, p.50). Anderson reports that he was “deeply distressed” by the fact that the novel’s protagonist “embraces abjection” (Ibid). In a television interview, reporter Andrea Stretton “asked time and time again, with disbelief, how Ettler faced the anguish and despair that are the themes of her fiction without caving in to them” (Davis, 1997, p.14). Stretton appeared to regard “Ettler’s response – that this is what many young people do every day” – to be “almost incomprehensible” (Ibid).

It is not unhelpful to regard *The River Ophelia* as belonging to a series of gritty, controversial books by ‘young’ Australian authors. These books call “attention to the existence of a significant, newly self conscious and disaffected urban youth subculture” (Kirkby, 1998, p.233). Novels such as *The River Ophelia* can certainly be read as “a revolt against and a challenge to the fetishisation of ‘fine writing’ by the mainstream, largely middle class, colonial Australian literary establishment” (Ibid). Some important research has already been done on ‘grunge’/ ‘dirty realist’ fiction (Ibid; and see also Leishman, 1999; Syson, 1996). It is imperative that this brief but lively phase in Australian writing is not overlooked or dismissed by literary scholars in the future.

Yet to only classify *The River Ophelia* as an example of ‘grunge writing’ or ‘dirty realism’ is at best simplistic, and at worst misleading. The use of terminology here is particularly problematic. In the mid-1990s, the term ‘grunge’ was most commonly used by the media to describe the music of U.S. rock acts such as Nirvana, Hole, Soundgarden
and Pearl Jam (Kirkby, 1998). The similarity between this music and Australian literary texts such as The River Ophelia is extremely superficial: that is, they all express what some critics might regard as youthful angst or despair. There are many and varied differences between American musical ‘grunge’ acts and the fiction written by Australian authors such as Ettler. As Ian Syson (1996) points out, differences also exist between the Australian literary texts that have been aligned with the ‘grunge’ and ‘dirty realist’ labels. Ettler herself has conceded that The River Ophelia is not “a social realist novel” as this term has commonly been understood (Ettler, 1995b, p.61). This distinguishes Ettler’s text from Loaded or Nature Strip, which are more identifiable as works of literary realism.

Conversely, it is too simplistic to regard The River Ophelia as being only about sex and power. Ettler told one reporter that her “novel’s really about who’s on top” (cited in Paviour, 1995, p.54). Elsewhere, she argued that “the way we are violent and sexual defines who we are … sex and violence, desire and power, are at the heart of our culture” (Ettler, 1995b, p.63). Ettler attributes this argument to the work of Foucault, Georges Bataille, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These are two of the many catchy, provocative statements that Ettler made around the time her novel was published. These statements might spice up a media interview or a conference paper, but they are not ultimately useful in describing either the work of the aforementioned theorists (all of whom inform Ettler’s narrative, as I will soon point out) or The River Ophelia itself.

I argue that The River Ophelia is best read as a self-consciously ‘Australian’ intervention into feminist debates about female masochism, sexual consent and sadism; as well as an intervention into the broader fields of feminist fiction and literary theory. The novel stages these interventions via Ettler’s feminist rewriting of certain male-authored texts. In addition to this, The River Ophelia raises questions about the status of Australia as a site of intellectual and literary production. These questions include, were Australians still being restricted by a “tyranny of distance” in the 1990s, or had this situation changed? Had the concept of ‘cultural cringe’ become entirely redundant by 1995?

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94 For a useful insight into the grunge music movement, see Doug Pray’s documentary Hype! (1997).
95 Lever (2000) provides an overview of literary realism amongst Australian women writers.
I will make a brief disclaimer before continuing. This concerns the names of characters in Ettler’s novel. Throughout the chapter, I refer to Ettler’s main protagonist as ‘Justine’ and the author of *The River Ophelia* as ‘Ettler’. I do this to create a clear delineation between author and character. Ettler herself seemed content to do without this delineation; as suggested, though, I will not read her novel in autobiographical terms. Similarly, I refer to the Marquis de Sade as ‘de Sade’ and Ettler’s male protagonist as ‘Sade’. Justine’s supervisor will be referred to as ‘Bataille’, and his literary namesake as ‘Georges Bataille’.

**Feminists (Re)-Write Male-Authored Literature**

*The River Ophelia* belongs to the wave of the sexually explicit writings by Australian women that also includes *Eat Me*. Additionally, Ettler’s novel is one of numerous feminist novels which attempt to “rewrite patriarchal master narratives and reveal them to be patriarchal fictions which form the foundation of constructed reality” (Barr, 1992, p.12). These texts are “not simply masculinist generic fiction with female heroes telling stories of oppression” (Cranny-Francis, 1990, p.9). Such fiction “would risk becoming an even more effective apology for patriarchy” (Ibid). Rather, these texts have emphasised the subjectivity of male-written female characters. These texts look at what their female characters might thinking and feeling - as opposed to what the novel’s author tells us that they (and, perhaps by extension, all women) think and feel.

In particular, *The River Ophelia* is indebted to the fiction of Kathy Acker. Acker rewrote male-authored novels such as *Don Quixote*, *Great Expectations* and *Treasure Island* from a feminist and broadly poststructuralist perspective (Friedman, 1989; Pitchford, 2002; Redding, 1994; Vanskike, 2000). On the most basic level, these rewritings are characterised by their graphic depictions of sex and violence. Acker also used masochism as a literary trope. In her fiction, masochism “emerges from the familiar – and familial – cultural processes whereby the despised image of the self is internalized” (Redding, 1994, p.285). This “disgust that characterizes one’s relationship to one’s body becomes erotically charged …” (Ibid). The “self-destruction” suggested by the masochistic tendencies of Acker’s protagonists is “always bound up with a utopian if somewhat solipsist desire for a radical transformation” (Ibid).
In *The River Ophelia*, Ettler references the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797), William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1602), Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* (1928), Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870), and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). Most of these texts have generated controversy for the way they conflate sex and violence (this conflation is hereafter referred to by the term ‘sadism’). In this chapter, I concentrate specifically on Ettler’s rewriting of *Justine*. Her choice of this text is significant for two reasons, the first of which is its author. De Sade famously gave his name to ‘sadism’; the term ‘sadomasochism’ was named after de Sade and Masoch (Deleuze, 1989, p.16). Amongst feminists and literary scholars, de Sade has been hailed as both a champion of free speech and the ultimate producer of literary woman-hatred (Sawhney, 1999). Debates about the politics of censoring de Sade’s work have distinct similarities to debates about the censorship of pornography.

Secondly, and more specifically, *Justine* takes the issue of female debasement as its central theme. The text focuses on a young woman (the title character) whose attempts to remain “virtuous” imprison her within a cycle of sexual violence (de Sade, 1990). According to Angela Carter and Andrea Dworkin, de Sade’s text exemplifies the misogyny which they detect within all pornography (Carter, 1982; Dworkin, 1981). For these theorists, Justine is an Everywoman figure, a representation of how all women suffer under patriarchy. Conversely, for literary theorist Frances Ferguson, *Justine* is “emblematic of a distinctively modern and utilitarian account of action and its significance for representations of individual intention” (Ferguson, 2004, p.57). The character Justine – far from being a timeless symbol of female victimisation in a misogynist and pornographic culture – is portrayed here as a woman misled by the “sentimental” belief that “action is (not) always physical and material…” (Ibid).

Ettler has stated that her aim in writing *The River Ophelia* was to “write something from the point of view of a woman who is a victim” and ask “what’s it like from her point of view?” (Ettler, 1995b, p.62). Ettler refers to female characters such as Justine and Shakespeare’s ‘Ophelia’. She refers also to the women depicted in more contemporary novels such as *American Psycho*. Ettler has praised Ellis’ text for “nailing

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96 Ferguson’s analysis draws strongly from utilitarian theory. This theoretical approach was most famously expounded by John Stuart Mill in his book *Utilitarianism* (1861).
powerful men as misogynists” and “provid(ing) a polemic critique of advertising, the way it brutally and repetitively uses sex to sell products” (cited in Dempsey, 1995, p.8). She has, however, argued that the women depicted in American Psycho are “incredibly passive and very flat” (cited in Paviour, 1995, p.54). In The River Ophelia, Ettler aimed to “get into that flat-woman character and make her do things” (Ibid).

Further to this, Ettler self-consciously frames her text as an example of how Australian writing was “coming out from under” in the 1990s (Gilbert, 1988; Lee, 2004). This is an aspect of the text that was merely hinted at in the various critical responses to the text. For example, the title of Don Anderson’s review is ‘Salo in Darlo’.97 The transnational implications of this title are not developed in Anderson’s piece, which focuses on his distressed reaction to the bleak lifestyle led by Ettler’s protagonist. Similarly, in her review, Rosemary Sorensen observes that many of the literary references that appear in The River Ophelia are “French” (Sorensen, 1995, p.12). Yet Sorensen spends most of her piece criticising Ettler’s “bilious prose” (Ibid). Witness also Ettler’s Who Weekly interview. This interview contains a photograph of the author sitting in front of a laptop computer, with a copy of Jean Baudrillard’s The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1995) in close proximity (Paviour, 1995, p.56). This photograph is accompanied by the following quote from Ettler: “Australians are sophisticated enough to understand my writing” (cited in Ibid). Again, this (over-determined) image of “global cultural flows” at work is not suggested in the article, which focuses on the novel’s sex and violence.

I argue that it is crucial that the national/geographical politics of The River Ophelia are not overlooked. Ettler’s novel appears to have been written with a ‘global’ readership as much as a ‘local’/Australian readership in mind. Ettler has acknowledged the influence of Acker’s work (Ettler, 1995c), as well as the 1980s literary ‘brat pack’. This ‘brat pack’ included Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz. According to Ettler, these American authors “published … writing about urban life, sex and the media in a provocative (and) nihilistic way” (Ettler, 1995b, p.62).

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97 ‘Darlo’ is short for Darlinghurst, the inner-city Sydney suburb that also featured in Eat Me.
One … thing about the Brat pack is that for me, they were the first writers who dealt with what I felt was the real world: the inner city, night clubs, drugs, sex and their characters were going to university or were straight out of university. The Brat Pack were writing about youth culture and when I started writing (*The River Ophelia*) I either didn’t know about or hadn’t read other Australian writers dealing with youth culture so I had this idea that my book … would give an Australian take on this. (Ibid, p.63)

Ettler also engages with a range of ‘French’ poststructuralist insights into sex, power, representation and the body. This engagement with poststructuralism is unsurprising if one considers the scholarly genesis of Ettler’s writing career. Ettler studied Creative Writing during the 1980s and 1990s (Morriset, 1996; Paviour, 1995). The teaching of Creative Writing in Australia has been influenced by – and has frequently incorporated - poststructuralist theories about writing and representation (Dawson, 2005). This is in keeping with the “rise in Theory in Australia”, which I described briefly in Chapter One (Ibid, p.26). Ettler is a graduate of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), alongside authors such as Jane Messer, Beth Yahp and Bernard Cohen (Wark, 1994b). These authors all had books published during the mid-1990s. Ettler has been quoted as saying: “The really liberating thing about poststructuralist theory for a writer is that the author is not the origin of the text … In the novels I borrow characters and put them in new contexts, rework them” (cited in Ibid).98

Throughout *The River Ophelia*, Ettler is implicitly critical of the “cultural cringe” (Ettler, 1995a, p.335). Early in the novel, Justine contemplates “running away to America. Life was better there” (Ibid, p.75). This contemplation comes while reading *American Psycho*, the author of which Justine refers to enviously as “the wealthy contemporary American novelist” (Ibid, p.74). Justine’s psychotherapist Juliette declares that she will sell her “incurable texts” (which I will discuss later in the chapter) in Europe because “(t)here just isn’t the market in Australia” for them (Ibid, p.335). As Justine’s mother remarks, however, “people spoke like that about Australia years ago, but …things

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98 These “novels” also include *Marilyn’s Almost Terminal New York Adventure* (1996), in which Ettler names characters after film stars and famous authors.
have changed” (Ibid, p.335). This echoes Ettler’s remark that her text would find an enthusiastic audience within Australia. The lively critical reception and the commercial success99 of The River Ophelia in Australia support the statements made by Justine’s mother and Ettler herself.

Also significantly, The River Ophelia’s setting has a ‘transnational’ feel. The novel ostensibly unfolds in inner-city Sydney, though the city itself is never named. Throughout The River Ophelia, there are random references to France. The novel opens at a party held in a house with “French doors” (Ettler, 1995a, p.4). Justine’s thesis supervisor, Bataille, teaches in a French department and carries around a “set of keys attached to a miniature Eiffel tower” (Ibid, p.45). He is named after the famous French author. The character Juliette is introduced wearing “her long blonde hair in a wispy French plait” (Ibid, p.39). On one level, these French artefacts are playful references to the fact the novel draws from French literature and theory. On another level, these references – plus the fact that the city Justine lives in remains nameless – support the suggestion that The River Ophelia could be set in any inner-city suburb in Australia or, even the world. This, in turn, supports the suggestion that Australia is participating actively in a global intellectual and political community.

Female Masochism and Sexual Consent

The most prominent feminist perspectives on female masochism have arisen from the debates about dominance-submission sexuality that were described in the previous chapter. The first perspective is based around the premise that masochism is both “the eroticisation of … powerlessness” (Linden, 1982, p.6) and an expression of “self-hatred” (Hawthorne, 1991, p.29). This “self-hatred” and eroticised “powerlessness” is understood here to be a by-product of what Kathleen Barry (1982) refers to as “cultural sadism” – the tendency for sadism (particularly that which is directed against women) to be packaged as entertainment, for example, through S/M and pornography. The masochist may also, according to this line of argument, be responding unconsciously to specific acts of abuse such as rape (Evans, 1993). In S/M, the female masochist enacts a mind/body split

99 According to journalist Andiee Paviour, Ettler’s novel “became a national best-seller in its first week on sale” (Paviour, 1995, p.54).
(Hawthorne, 1996, p.496). She becomes the subject rather than the agent of her sexual encounters.

A similar mind/body split has characterised some understandings of sexual consent. The U.K. legal scholar Sharon Cowan suggests this in her essay ‘Choosing Freely: Theoretically Reframing the Concept of Consent’ (2007):

… the boundary between mind and body is inherently unstable and is undermined by the very application of law itself; since it is impossible to see inside the mind in order to ascertain people’s intentions and beliefs, criminal law infers the mental state of its subjects from actions performed through the body. This is especially problematic in rape where intentions, desires and consent itself, have historically been inferred from dress, behaviour, intoxication and previous sexual history. (Cowan, 2007, p.92)

Also, “(n)o-one ‘consents’ to something that they really want, and it is impossible to simultaneously initiate sex and consent to it” (Serisier and Pendleton, 2008, p.50). Perhaps for these reasons, some feminists have argued that consent is only useful for attempting to justify unwanted sex. According to Susan Hawthorne: “Consent is a ploy that the powerful use to legitimate whatever they do. Legally speaking, it changes the act from one of violation to one that is acceptable” (Hawthorne, 1991, p.23). Hawthorne adds: “Consent is only required when people are vulnerable in some way: legally, medically, emotionally, sexually” (Ibid). She argues that sexually “vulnerable” individuals – namely women – use the argument of consent to justify their participation in S/M.

However, while many feminists have agreed that sexual consent is in several respects problematic, not all have entirely rejected this concept. As I describe later in the chapter, there have been challenges to the idea that “women are not free and equal individuals in … giving consent” (Jeffreys, 1993b, p.176). Some feminists have argued that women (and men) who engage in S/M are “fully in command of their faculties” (Hunt, 1987, p.87). According to Margaret Hunt, the female masochist has not always been a victim of sexual violence, and is not always influenced by patriarchal models of
sexuality (Ibid). Female masochism does not always replicate “the real powerlessness and submission of a woman under patriarchy” (Archard, 1998, p.115). According to Karmen MacKendrick:

… consensual, pleasurable masochism is not complicity in victimisation but a strategic play of the body’s power against normative power, delight against moral norms, a delight in subversion. Specifically, this delight subverts two deeply significant social norms – the disciplinary emphasis on productivity and efficiency, and more deeply still the insistence on the stable sense of the body as the subject, I, myself. (MacKendrick, 1998, p.34)

Pat/Patrick Califia endorses this kind of argument when he writes: “A good top … alternates pain with pleasure, rewards endurance with more pleasure, and teaches the bottom to transcend her own limits” (Califia, 1994, p.171). As Califia acknowledges, the roles ‘masochist’ and ‘sadist’ are not rigid or fixed. In S/M, “the participants select particular roles that best express their sexual needs” and “if you don’t like being a top or bottom, you switch …” (Ibid, p.169).

This latter argument about the shifting nature of dominant-submissive sexual roles seems similar in spirit to Freud’s oft-cited observation that a “sadist is always at the same time a masochist…” (cited in Linden, 1982, p.5). However, theorists such as MacKendrick have been more influenced by poststructuralist work on S/M, power and the body. Central to this work is the argument that S/M does not necessarily reproduce oppressive social structures, nor can it always be directly attributed to childhood traumas. In the previous chapter, I cited Foucault’s defence of S/M. Early in his book Discipline and Punish (1977), Foucault argues:

… the body is … directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up … with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but … its
constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection … the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (Foucault, 1977a, pp.25-6)

In this passage, Foucault seems to concur with the radical feminist argument that S/M involves the exertion of sexualised power over another individual. Yet he also contends that S/M does not constitute a more or less straightforward “relationship between he (sic) who suffers and he who inflicts suffering …” (cited in Foucault and O’Higgins, 1982-83, p.20). For Foucault, masochism does not always equate to social powerlessness or discrimination, just as sexual domination does not always equate to ‘real-life’ power. Members of oppressed groups (women, gay men, lesbians) can still perform the role of ‘sadist’, just as members of powerful social groups (for example, white heterosexual men) can perform the roles of ‘masochist’ or ‘submissive’.

Deleuze and Guattari have contributed to poststructuralist understandings of dominance-submission sexuality. Deleuze’ book *Masochism* (1967) provides one of the most extensive accounts of masochism as it is represented in the work of de Sade, Masoch and Georges Bataille. I engage with insights from this text at different points throughout the chapter. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari argue that the masochistic body can be conceptualised as the “Body without Organs”. This metaphorical body is one “upon which intensities pass …” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p.154).

… the masochist’s suffering is the price he must pay, not to achieve pleasure, but to untie the pseudobond between desire and pleasure as an extrinsic measure. Pleasure is in no way something that can be attained only by a detour through suffering: it is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire. (Ibid, p.155)

In passages such as this one, Deleuze and Guattari challenge the familiar psychoanalytic premise that “the masochist … is after pleasure but can only get it through pain and phantasied humiliations whose function is to allay or ward off deep anxiety” (Ibid). They
also contest the argument that masochism is simply an example of internalised oppression. Deleuze and Guattari suggest how the masochist “uses suffering as a way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire” (Ibid). According to their analysis, masochism both constitutes and exceeds the individual’s body and subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that “(t)here are other ways, other procedures than masochism” for achieving this “consistency of desire” (Ibid). However, that is “beside the point” as “it is enough that some find” masochistic practices to be “suitable for them” (Ibid).

The various perspectives on masochism and sexual consent that I have just described are seemingly incompatible, and yet Ettler engages with all of them throughout The River Ophelia. For all the emphasis the novel’s critics placed on generation conflict, Ettler’s novel never pits a supposedly ‘older’ anti-S/M feminism against a ‘newer’ pro-S/M feminism (or vice versa). The character ‘Justine’ detects a possible relationship between her desire for violent sex and a broader cultural trend whereby sadism (particularly as it is directed against women) has become an acceptable and, indeed, pervasive aspect of the entertainment industry and everyday life. At the same time, Justine’s masochism is not reducible to childhood traumas or the fact that she is a woman. Her fantasies of sexual subordination are coupled with fantasies of sexually dominating others, both female and male.

Of course, it would be too optimistic to suggest that The River Ophelia will eradicate conflicts between feminists who hold differing views on S/M. My reading of this novel suggests that it has the potential to “open up a space for dialogue between theoretical generations” (Sullivan, 1997b, p.283). Feminist conflicts over S/M have been as “theoretically and practically debilitating” as feminist conflicts about pornography (Ibid). Ettler is one feminist who has refused the temptation (at least in her novel) to “canonise” one particular “position” on this issue “at the expense of the other” (Ibid).

The Sadeian Woman in Sydney: The Politics of Female Masochism
The textual and sexual politics of The River Ophelia are introduced in the opening chapter, in which the two central characters meet at a party. Justine is an Honours student who is “supposed to be” researching a thesis on “(s)ex and death” (Ettler, 1995a, p.5).
Sade is a *Playboy* journalist who declares that women are “all the same … (they) are after one thing and one thing only” (Ibid, p.54). Drunk and stoned, the pair returns to Justine’s inner-city flat for a night of sex which is described in the following manner:

> I hadn’t even managed to lock the front door behind us when Sade grabbed me and started tearing all my clothes off. He kissed me hard and I tasted blood in my mouth. He dragged me to my bed and ripping my underpants in half pushed me down on the bed and fucked me, plunging right in up to the hilt so that it hurt. (Ibid, p.11)

Ettler’s emotionally-vacant, stream-of-consciousness prose will be familiar to readers who are familiar with *American Psycho*, Kathy Acker’s fiction, de Sade’s *Justine*, or the “pseudo-objectivity” of journalistic discourse (Ettler, 1995d, p.113). Ettler’s prose was (like the prose featured in *Eat Me*) criticised by some reviewers for lacking sophistication (Merz, 1995; Sorenson, 1995). I concur with McKenzie Wark that Ettler’s writing style and the random media/popular culture critiques that appear throughout the book suggest how Justine’s “theory-wise mind” is “beating itself into stupidity and reflecting on the mess” (Wark, 1995, p.26).

Further to this, *The River Ophelia* serves the purpose of the thesis Justine never seems to write: it explores how sex and death – or, rather, sex and power – are interrelated. At one point, Justine discusses her thesis with Bataille. Bataille argues that “… the thesis reads as a celebration of violence against women and that’s going to make it very difficult for the examiners” (Ettler, 1995a, p.307). Justine remarks: “It’s up to the reader to judge whether the author’s use of violence is warranted, not me” (Ibid). Ettler has remarked that her prose “forces the reader to have opinions about what’s happening…” (cited in Morriset, 1996). By describing violent sexual acts in a clinical tone, Ettler allows for multiple readings of her text.

To some extent, *The River Ophelia* does suggest that dominance-submission sexuality and pornography have resulted from – and play a role in enforcing - male domination and female subordination. Rosemary Sorenson partly anticipates this reading when she labels the novel “anti-erotic” (Sorenson, 1995, p.12). *The River Ophelia* begins
with first person narration, and switches to third-person narration early in the novel. The change in narrative voice occurs shortly after Justine’s brief encounter with a prostitute on a city street. Justine observes that she “envied” the prostitute “and the chilly distance she maintained between herself and all that happened in the world” (Ettler, 1995a, p.101). This passage suggests firstly the split between body and mind that (according to one feminist perspective) is a crucial aspect of masochism. This passage also invokes the radical feminist argument that the prostitute is the ultimate example of female victimisation. According to this argument, the prostitute must dissociate in order to endure the sexual abuse inflicted by the men who use her services (see Jeffreys, 1997).

Furthermore, *The River Ophelia*’s narration is reminiscent of the argument (advanced by Bataille and Deleuze) that “the language of Sade is … essentially that of a victim. Only the victim can describe torture; the torturer necessarily uses the hypocritical language of established order and power” (Deleuze, 1989, p.17; his emphasis). Justine is not the subject of her narrative, even when this narrative is told from her point-of-view. Justine is also passive within most of her sexual encounters. Sade is the one who uses the “language of established order and power”. Moments before the pair’s first sexual encounter, he informs Justine that “I’d never hurt you” while at the same time “holding her wrist, squeezing again” (Ettler, 1995a, p.10). Sade then jokes: “It’s only a game … Friday nights always make me want to rape and pillage” (Ibid).

Yet, the notion of a mind-body split is complicated by the fact that Justine has what Ettler describes as an “unrealistic body” (cited in Hannaford, 1995, p.19). Justine “hardly eats”, is subject to violence at her own hands as well as the hands of others, and consumes copious amounts of alcohol and drugs (cited in Ibid). This “unrealistic body” bears some resemblance to the “Body without Organs” described in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The “intensities” which Justine experiences seem to bring into being her corporeality; she does not simply inflict these “intensities” on a pre-existing corporeality. Her substance abuse and desire for violent sex give her “a chilly distance from the world”, but they are also experiences that she feels “acutely”. The “Body without Organs” sketched by Deleuze and Guattari was essentially a male body, as suggested by their constant use of male pronouns; the body at the centre of *The River Ophelia* is a
distinctly female one. Witness the references to “cuntjuice” or the “seven abortions” that Justine has undergone (Ettler, 1995a, p.117).

Relatedly, and Don Anderson suggests this in his review, Justine “embraces abjection”. For Julia Kristeva (1980), “abjection … signals a crisis of subjectivity, a state of boundary confusion in which one has trouble knowing where one’s own body/subjectivity ends and another begins – both psychically and physically …” (cited in Kirkby, 1998, p.237). By embracing abjection, whether it is induced by sex or substance abuse, Justine does not achieve any real personal or political liberation. However, as Joan Kirkby points out, Justine “owns, names and finally takes responsibility for the unknowable aspects of subjectivity” (Ibid). Justine is thus almost impossible to read as a ‘real woman’ with a ‘real body’. She is certainly no Everywoman.

Throughout The River Ophelia, Ettler suggests that female masochism entails what she calls “exquisite pain”:

‘The thing is,’ Ophelia said ominously, making (Justine) turn around, ‘the thing about all this pain (women) go through, all this love that just hurts all the time, the thing about all this pain is that it’s really exquisite. It’s exquisite pain. That’s what makes us keep going back for more’ (Ettler, 1995a, p.134).

The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines the term ‘exquisite’ thus: “Of great excellence or beauty; acute, keenly felt (exquisite pain, pleasure); keen (exquisite sensibility) …” (Sykes, 1980, pp.366-7; my emphasis). Ettler suggests that one reason why women “go back for more” of this pain that is “of great excellence” and (more cryptically) “acutely felt” lies in a society in which the sexual “objectification of women is relentless” (cited in Morriset, 1996). In The River Ophelia, men treat Justine and her female friends as sexual objects. Consider Sade’s remarks about women, or the ostensibly pro-feminist Hamlet’s casual observation that Ophelia is simply “a fuck” as opposed to a partner (Ettler, 1995a, p.196). Consider also Bataille, who – after admonishing Justine for describing literary representations of violence against women in her thesis – whispers: “I want cunt” (Ibid, p.308). Women, in Ettler’s novel, are viewed by men as “cunts” and “fucks”; they are reduced to their body parts and perceived sexual value.
The approach that the characters in *The River Ophelia* take towards sadism is one of both repulsion and fascination. This repulsion/fascination is suggested throughout the novel by two tropes. The first of these is the all-seeing eye, and has been borrowed from *Story of the Eye*. The eye appears in the blood that is spilled throughout *The River Ophelia*. I will provide one example very soon. In Georges Bataille’s novel, the eye functions as part of a complex “chains of significants” (Barthes, 1982, p.122). As Roland Barthes argues, *Story of the Eye* “in no way nominates the sexual as the first term in the chain”, even if the novel is itself sexually explicit (Ibid). In *The River Ophelia*, the recurring eye is an obvious metaphor for voyeurism. This eye stands in for the eyes of the readers, and it bears witness to the textual representations of sordid sexuality.

The second trope is what Ettler refers to as the “incurable texts”. Justine discovers these texts on Juliette’s bookcase late in the novel (Ettler, 1995a, p.300). The “incurable texts” include *Hamlet*, as well as Freud’s *On Metapsychology*. Specific reference is made to the chapter of Freud’s book entitled ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in which the issue of masochism is discussed (Freud, 1984). The “incurable texts” literally ooze flesh and blood. This blood takes on an eye-like appearance:

… (Justine) stared at the slit where the two pages met along the binding. The leaves of white paper were separated by a thin dark line. At first black, she soon noticed that it was much less a black black and much more a very dark red. As she continued to stare … (d)ark red liquid slowly oozed out from the slit invisibly soaking into the page. The slit of blood stared up at her blindly like an unseeing eye. (Ettler, 1995a, p.299)

In an essay published shortly after *The River Ophelia* was published, Ettler describes the way in which certain 1990s authors and filmmakers portrayed sadism in graphic and darkly comical ways. This representation of sadism encourages readers/viewers to acknowledge how their “sense of horror has been blunted by the nightly news” (Ettler, 1995d, p.113). These artists are demonstrating what Ettler refers to as “the Attitude” (Ibid). Ettler names Bret Easton Ellis as one artist whose work is suffused with “the Attitude”, as well as the director Quentin Tarantino. These authors and filmmakers have
demonstrated that by being entertained or amused by sadism, readers and viewers have ultimately become “complicit” with this sadism (Ibid). As Ettler puts it: “You have laughed when the beautiful, innocent victim has been senselessly and viciously murdered, haven’t you?” (Ibid; her emphasis).

Films and novels containing strong violence are frequently accused of inciting ‘real-life’ brutality, just as pornography is blamed for inciting sexual abuse. The equation of representational violence with ‘real-life’ violence has again been made by conservatives and feminists alike. In Bad Girls, Catharine Lumby cites the right-wing American Senator Bob Dole’s argument that “human dignity and decency” are being threatened “whenever Hollywood movies promote ‘mindless violence and loveless sex’” (cited in Lumby, 1997a, p.54). Human dignity and decency are also jeopardised when record labels “release ‘music extolling the pleasures of raping, torturing and mutilating women’” (cited in Ibid). The Australian feminist lawyer Jocelynne Scutt advances arguments similar to Dole’s in her critical response to American Psycho (Scutt, 1991).

The broader link between violence and eroticism has been discussed at greater length by a range of commentators. Not all of these commentators have necessarily tried to establish a relationship between representation and reality. According to Deleuze, “violence and eroticism meet” in “pornographic literature” (Deleuze, 1989, p.17). In The Lust to Kill (1987), Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser argue that certain violent acts provide an erotic frisson to their perpetrators. Cameron and Fraser focus on “sadistic sexual murder”, though they also suggest that violence and sex are intertwined in the term ‘lust’ (Fraser and Cameron, 1987, p.ix). This term tends to apply “to only two desires – sexual desire and the desire for blood (‘blood-lust’)” (Ibid). For Cameron and Fraser, “these two desires are systematically connected” (Ibid).

Ettler follows feminists such as Kathleen Barry in attempting to explain how and why sadism has become not only socially acceptable, but also a form of lurid entertainment. In The River Ophelia, this critique is suggested by references to the then-topical American Psycho, and the media hype surrounding the issue of violence against women. For example, Juliette becomes a media celebrity after killing a number of women, including the character Ophelia (Ettler, 1995a, p.354). The media gives Juliette the moniker “Dr Blood” and describes her lifestyle as something from a schlock-horror
film: “The camera cut to the rows of glass cabinets in Juliette’s attic and then to a small room which looked a lot like a science laboratory …” (Ibid). Her “preferred organ” was the liver because it contains “the most blood” (Ibid).

In short, both Ettler and Barry seem to concede that sadism has been a pervasive aspect of Western culture. Barry’s concept of “cultural sadism” is offered as a kind of semi-sociological framework, a way of understanding how sadism directed against women is rampantly carried out and condoned. Ettler’s concept of “the Attitude” is focused on how this sadism is glorified in popular culture. “The Attitude” is not specifically feminist (there is nothing radical in depicting violence against women), but neither is it anti-feminist (the reader or viewer is forced to confront the fact that they are taking delight in someone else’s pain and suffering; they are not simply invited to take pleasure in watching or reading about this pain and suffering).

Also, both Ettler and Barry seem to concur that “the best place to begin looking for the ideological roots of cultural sadism is with its namesake, the Marquis de Sade” (Barry, 1982, p.51). De Sade “didn’t invent sadism” (or what has come to be known as ‘sadism’), but Barry suggests that his life “depicts one of the fullest accounts of the behaviours with which his name is associated” (Ibid). In an analysis that is clearly indebted to scholars such as Dworkin, Barry points out that de Sade was responsible for carrying out “rape, beatings and torture”, and argues that these crimes “do not characterize men of a particular class or caste …Most men from every class who committed these acts have gotten away with it throughout the ages. It is the license of patriarchy” (Ibid, p.54).

De Sade was not alone in portraying sadism as politically and emotionally transgressive. Consider some of the laudatory commentaries that have been made about his work. Deleuze has argued that “the acts of violence inflicted on the victims” in de Sade’s fiction “are … mere reflection(s) of a higher form of violence” and that this violence is “linked with eroticism” (Deleuze, 1967, p.19). In 1972, Foucault argued that “at the end of the (twentieth century)”, de Sade will “find again the depths of profanations, allow to rise … all those voices of the world in which nature has been

100 For alternate and equally compelling readings of de Sade’s life and literature, see Corkhill (2004); Ferguson (2004); Sawhney (1999).
abolished” (cited in Lecourt, 1993, p.124). This is related to his understanding of transgression:

Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world); and exactly for this reason, its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise. Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being – affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. (Foucault, 1977b, p.35)

According to Foucault, sadism is transgressive because it “constitutes one of the greatest conversions of the western imagination: unreason turned into delirium of the heart, madness of desire, wild dialogue of love and death with the limitless presumption of the appetite” (cited in Le Court, 1993, p.124). Foucault also argues: “What characterizes modern sexuality from Sade to Freud is … its having been “denatured” – cast into an empty zone where it achieves whatever meagre form is bestowed upon it by the establishment of its limits” (Foucault, 1977b, pp. 29-30).

Foucault appears to suggest that de Sade’s work would receive renewed critical interest in the latter part of the twentieth century. That suggestion proved to be correct (see Sawhney, 1999). More problematically, both Foucault and Deleuze seem to read this work in a highly reverential – or, at the very least, an uncritical – manner. They both concur that sadism is transgressive because it highlights the artificiality of the “limits” placed on human behaviour. As Deleuze argues:

In any case whether Sade and Masoch are “patients” or clinicians or both, they are also great anthropologists, of the type whose work succeeds in embracing a whole conception of man, culture and nature …they are also great artists in that they discovered new forms of expression, new ways of thinking and feeling and an entirely original language. (Deleuze, 1989, p.16)
Neither Foucault nor Deleuze suggests whose “delirium of the heart” is satisfied or aroused by sadism. They do not suggest who carries out sadistic activities and who has this sadism inflicted upon them. In *The River Ophelia*, Ettler looks at which sexed bodies carry out acts of sadism and which ones are subjected (or subject themselves) to sadism.

Unlike Barry or Dworkin, however, Ettler does not hint at a straightforward link between cultural representations and violence against women. The character Justine suggests this in her response to the media accounts of a woman and child who were murdered by their father/husband:

> Violent videos hired in the father/husband’s name from a local video shop were … found in the house. The article ends with a censorship debate. I am amazed when I think of the way people conveniently blame violence depicted in the media, films, videos and novels for abusive behaviour. If a man walks into a shopping mall and shoots ten people dead and has copies of *Body Double* or *American Psycho* in his flat then the books or videos must be responsible. (Ettler, 1995a, p.366)

As Ettler suggests, the viewer or reader is left to decide whether there is a relationship between “the hard on that results from murder, the hard on that results from power” and “the hard-on that is essential for rape” (Ettler, 1995d, p.113). Certain texts (*American Psycho, Body Double*) may be accused of promoting violence against women, but they also encourage the viewer or reader to consider whether they are actually enjoying this violence. These texts hold up a mirror to certain reading/viewing habits and cultural mores as much as they cater to these habits and mores.

To this extent, then, Ettler echoes Catharine Lumby’s argument that the contemporary media is aware it is dealing with a media-savvy public. This is a public that is aware of the messages it is being bombarded with through television, film, newspapers. Ettler recognises that attributing ‘real-life’ violence to the media can enable men to avoid

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101 *Body Double* is cited in *American Psycho* as a favourite film of that novel’s murderous protagonist, largely because of its depictions of violence against women. Significantly, *Body Double* is (like *American Psycho* and *The River Ophelia*) highly intertextual and self-conscious.
taking responsibility for their actions. As Justine remarks: “In my opinion it’s a case of
the chicken or the egg – the representation of violent abuse or the practise of violent
abuse? To blame the media is also to mystify the media” (Ettler, 1995a, p.366).
Furthermore, Ettler avoids repeating the argument that cultural representations of sex and
violence are responsible for causing social decay.

Similarly, The River Ophelia does not identify a definitive ‘cause’ of masochism.
Justine attempts to attribute her taste for “exquisite pain” to a long-repressed childhood
episode in which she witnessed her pregnant mother being savagely beaten by her
father’s jealous ex-wife. This recollection is relayed to the reader via written accounts of
the beating and also by conversations between Justine and Juliette. Reflecting on this
moment of early violence in a letter to her dying father, Justine concludes that it was
responsible for turning her into a “monster” who enjoys violent sex (Ibid, p.314).

… Everything makes sense now that I finally know the truth. I know I watched
that woman try and kill my mother and my brother. And I saw her live on
unpunished. My life has been haunted by that day …

Your ex-wife, the ‘other woman’, reappears now in Juliette and in me.
You reappear in Sade, the man accused. A younger me who stopped trusting you
reappears in an older me who can’t trust men. (Ibid, p.370)

Justine’s letter reads like a variation on Freud’s 1919 essay ‘A Child is Being Beaten’. In
this essay, Freud draws on a young girl’s “fantasies”, two of which I will describe here
(McCabe, 2004, p.90). In the first fantasy, the girl witnesses “another child she dislikes”
being beaten by her father (Ibid). This fantasy “confirms to the girl that her father loves
her” (Ibid). In the second fantasy, it is the girl herself who is being beaten by her father.
This second fantasy has a “decidedly masochistic quality”, and – in its aftermath –
“(s)hame and punishment are attached to sexual desire” in the girl’s eyes (Ibid). In The
River Ophelia, Justine finally deduces that her father does not love her due to his inability
to punish his ex-wife for her abusiveness. This is abusiveness that he may have provoked.
According to Justine, her father “reappears” in the other violent and unloving men and
women she encounters. For Justine, sexual desire is certainly linked to shame and punishment.

Strikingly, though, Justine’s recollections seem almost absurd in their earnestness. They contrast markedly to the rest of the novel, in which the prose is devoid of any real emotion. Ettler points out that “the extent of Justine’s … victimisation during the assault changes” each time she describes it (Ettler, 1995b, p.64). Justine is thus “an unreliable narrator” (Ibid). This unreliability should not be read as a suggestion that women who are sexually violated cannot be believed. Rather, it supports Ettler’s critique of the relationship between sex and the act of confession. According to the character Simone:

Not only have roving TV cameras replaced going to church but confessions have been given a new use … no longer limited to private individual instruction, the TV camera confession is the plaything of the new ever-hypocritical bourgeois mass media. The TV confession allows them to keep playing their hypocritical games, moral outrage as mass banality, as banal diversion. (Ettler, 1995a, pp. 265-66)

This passage is self-consciously Foucauldian in tone. In the first volume of his History of Sexuality trilogy, Foucault argues that “the confession (is) one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth” (Foucault, 1976, p.58). He contends that “(f)rom the Christian penance to the present day, sex (has been) a privileged theme of confession” (Ibid, p.61). By confessing one’s “sexual peculiarity”, one is thought to confess a certain truth about one’s self (Ibid). This belief is problematic because, as Foucault reminds us, the confession “unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence … of a partner” (Ibid). This “partner” is “not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console …” (Ibid).

Through critiquing the act of confession, Ettler also helps “dislodge some of the authority that novels, and society at large, lend to psychoanalysis …” (Ettler, 1995b, p.64). The River Ophelia’s most overt critique of psychoanalysis comes in the form of Juliette. In de Sade’s fiction, Juliette was Justine’s brazen older sister. Juliette seduced and killed affluent men, and was the one to whom Justine confessed her sinful behaviour
(see Sade, 1968 and 1990). In *The River Ophelia*, Juliette is the “authority” figure to whom Justine confesses her childhood experience of abuse. Justine may hope that Juliette will “console” her, but this does not happen. During their sessions, Juliette merely “rais(es) her eyebrows and nod(s) her head”, and makes throwaway remarks such as “good question” (Ettler, 1995a, pp. 296 and 295). Here, we are reminded of Barry’s argument that Freud’s “theories of sexuality and sadism are totally deterministic” (Barry, 1982, p.59). In Freudian psychoanalysis, argues Barry, “the conditions that give rise to sexual violence have been reduced to a discussion of internal psychological mechanisms” (Ibid). At the same time, Justine’s attempt to link her masochism with a possibly fabricated episode of childhood abuse is unsuccessful. Ettler challenges the argument posed by some anti-S/M feminists that masochism is a by-product of childhood abuse.

In *The River Ophelia*’s closing lines, Justine is swimming at a local pool when she spots a man with “the sweetest smile”. This sighting prompts her to declare triumphantly: “I’m waiting for an angel. I’m waiting to start again” (Ettler, 1995a, p.387). Justine is now single, having severed her relationship with Sade. Some reviewers read this as a conventional happy ending (Hammett, 1995, p.251), or as an example of Ettler’s inability to “imagine a woman as anything other than desperate for a man” (Lucas, 1995, p.8). This latter criticism links in with the accusation that Justine is a retrogressive image of femininity. A prime example of this accusation can be found in Gelder and Salzman’s book *After the Celebration*. The authors rightly concede that “*The River Ophelia* was mistaken for a work of realism” (Gelder and Salzman, 2006, p.206). Gelder and Salzman then argue:

> Of course, grunge fiction isn’t intended to have the kind of now-old-fashioned moral purpose of a ‘feminist approach’, but Ettler’s novel does not use grunge against the stereotypes of women it relies on. It is the men, even the indecisive ones, who dominate, while women are constantly weeping, bleeding, and describing their cunts … (Ibid)

As Ettler points out, such readings are problematic in that they focus on “what is purely represented … They’re not looking at the implication of what I’m doing with Justine,
which is quite different to what I’m depicting” (cited in Morriset, 1996). Justine may assume she has been “washed clean” of her dependence on men, but in fact Ettler suggests that this dependence will only persist (Lucas, 1995, p.13). The truth does not liberate Justine on either a personal or political level, for in *The River Ophelia* the whole concept of ‘truth’ is rendered problematic.

Throughout the novel, Justine does not only subject herself to acts of sexual domination. She fantasises about and commits some of these acts. Justine punches Sade at one point and elsewhere orders him to “take off all (his) clothes” (Ettler, 1995a, pp.152 and 86). Justine fantasises about brutally assaulting the women she suspects him of having sex with (Ibid, p.67). She describes an anonymous young man she encounters in a bar as being “an absolute fuck” (Ibid, p.147). Justine also attempts to seduce the sleeping Ophelia:

> Ophelia seemed to be smiling while she slept and Justine couldn’t help leaning down and kissing her on the lips. She put her tongue inside but Ophelia just moaned and turned her head away … (Justine) pulled down Ophelia’s underpants and stared at her hairy blonde cunt. She slipped her pinky inside and Ophelia moaned. She pushed back the hair and exposed the tiny red clit. Then she licked it very very gently. Ophelia lay perfectly still. Was she raping her friend? (Ibid, p.187)

Justine’s actions might well be read as the actions of a woman who has internalised the traditionally masculine role of sexual aggressor. This argument is not entirely invalid. No form of sexual expression can be entirely untainted by the views and values of a particular society. No form of sexuality can be entirely divorced from “cultural sadism”.

My point is that in moments such as those I have described, Ettler does acknowledge that the line between ‘aggressor’ and ‘victim’ can be opaque. The ‘masochist’ or ‘bottom’ in an S/M scenario is not always completely powerless. Such a

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102 Also problematic is Gelder and Salzman’s use of the term ‘grunge’. They seem to assume that grunge is a subversive literary technique, as suggested by lines such as “use grunge against the stereotypes of women…”
suggestion runs counter to anti-S/M feminist arguments, as well as Deleuze’ argument that women are unable to truly adopt the dominant role in S/M: “The woman torturer of masochism cannot be sadistic precisely because she is in the masochistic situation … a realization of the masochistic fantasy” (Deleuze, 1989, p.41). The “sexual power” that Justine believes she wields is often illusory (Hammett, 1995, p.51). For instance, Justine believes she holds the greater balance of power in her relationship with Bataille because she “mak(es) it through her honours year well before graduation” (Ibid). This is before she discovers a file on her supervisor’s computer titled “Students I Have Slept With”, which reveals to Justine “that it is he who holds, and repeatedly abuses, the stronger institutionalised position of power” (Ibid). Conversely, Justine faces the possibility that sexually penetrating the sleeping Ophelia could be construed as an act of “rape”.

Justine’s digital penetration of her friend also raises the question of how exactly sexual consent can be defined (Ibid). Sexual consent, here, is certainly not as straightforward as saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to sex. Nor is it understood as merely a way of trying to justify male violence against women. The latter understanding of consent is premised on the assumption that “(u)nder a system of hetero-patriarchy, women are unable to exercise choice and therefore are not able to give valid consent to sexual intercourse” with men (Moore and Reynolds, 2004, p.31). In other words, because “hetero-patriarchy” is so pervasive, women will always be powerless in their sexual encounters with men. Heterosexual sex becomes a site of perpetual gender inequality.

Conversely, in the Justine/Ophelia bedroom episode, a woman penetrates a sleeping woman. Ettler’s suggestions of lesbianism are significant. Debates about S/M have frequently taken place between lesbian feminists, and have revolved around the question of whether lesbian S/M reproduces heterosexual gender roles (Dale, 1996; Hart, 1998a; Hawthorne, 1991). While penetrating Ophelia, Justine describes a fantasy in which she is “dress(ed) up like a man” in order to seduce her friend (Ettler, 1995a, p.187). Justine’s fantasy of adopting a masculine disguise reminds us of the “implicit connection” between S/M and butch-femme lesbian role-playing (Hart, 1998b, p.217). Theorists such as Sheila Jeffreys have argued that the apparent power imbalances in S/M and butch-femme are deeply problematic. This is, however, not the case for scholars such

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103 For an amusing queer reading of Ettler’s text, see Costigan (1995).
as Lynda Hart (Ibid and 1998a). As mentioned in Chapter Three, scholars such as Hart and Lisa Walker (2001) have thoroughly rejected the argument that femininity or sexual subordination always equate to social/political subordination.

The Justine-Ophelia bedroom episode also complicates the body-mind dualism that informs some understandings of sexual consent; and it points to the ambiguity that exists within the relationship between mind and body. As Sharon Cowan argues:

Partners who have established a pattern or custom of communications need not necessarily express consent verbally on every occasion … However, there are good reasons to think that where parties are unfamiliar with each other’s body language, and have no background knowledge of the ways in which the other responds to intimate situations, it will often be the case that men will misinterpret women’s ‘signals’. (Cowan, 2007, p.100)

Consider Ophelia’s moan, as well as the fact that she may not have been asleep after all: shortly after the penetration, Justine implores her friend to “wake up” and Ophelia promptly replies that she is “too tired” to do this (Ettler, 1995a, p.187). Can we read Ophelia’s responses to Justine’s behaviour as “signals” and, if so, of what? Is Ophelia aware that she is being penetrated by Justine and, if so, how does Ophelia feel about this? Was she asleep while she was being penetrated? Does it even matter if Ophelia was asleep? If Ophelia is sexually aroused, does this mean that she ‘consents’ to this encounter? How exactly does Justine read Ophelia’s “body language”? Why does Justine imagine herself in a stereotypically ‘masculine’ role and Ophelia in a stereotypically ‘feminine’ role?

I conclude this chapter with the question of how feminism itself is portrayed in The River Ophelia. Justine certainly acknowledges the existence of feminist discourses.

Why don’t I leave him? How can I still love him? What’s wrong with me? Why don’t I see this for what it is? … I cry even harder. Nothing can help me. Not feminism, not psychoanalysis. I’m never going to be happy. I’m never going to believe I can be happy.
I’m never going to be in control of my life. (Ibid, p.366)

Passages such as this one are not examples of female empowerment. There is nothing empowering or progressive in dismissing feminism for being politically useless (a point that underpinned my critique of *The First Stone*). The self-conscious tone of this passage does, however, help contradict what Justine is saying. There is the suggestion that Justine *does* understand why she does not leave Sade and that she *does* see their relationship “for what it is”. Justine is aware that she can use feminism to at least analyse her “exquisite pain”, even if she is ultimately unwilling to conduct such an analysis or to relinquish her masochistic tendencies.

I have argued that *The River Ophelia* is framed as a self-consciously ‘Australian’ intervention into feminist rewritings of male-authored literature, as well as into feminist debates about female masochism, sexual consent and the ‘sexual’ nature of violence. Ettler mobilises a range of quite different feminist perspectives on all three issues. The character Justine “embraces abjection” at the same time as she wields (or fantasises about wielding) sexualised power over others. She is able to critically analyse a cultural fascination with sadism, but her attempt to link her masochism to a childhood trauma is unconvincing. Justine recognises the liberatory potential of feminism, even if she ultimately rejects feminist discourse because she feels that she will “never” be “on top”. The aspects of *The River Ophelia* that I have explored in this chapter are all particularly unique. However, as I have demonstrated, they were overlooked by critics who regarded the novel as simply another example of ‘grunge’/‘dirty realist’ fiction.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have addressed a selection of texts published in Australia between 1993 and 1997 that engage with feminist debates about sex and power. I have argued that these texts are significant because they signpost the historical moment in which the culture wars began to unfold in Australia. This transnational spread of the culture wars from the U.S. is, as I have argued, paradigmatic of the broader phenomenon known as ‘globalisation’ or (more specifically) ‘cultural globalisation’. In my texts and many of the critical responses to these texts, these conflicts have been framed (albeit in different ways) as conflicts between different feminist ‘generations’. These ‘generations’ supposedly hold extremely different perspectives on how sex and power are interrelated in certain “morality issues”.

In Chapters One and Two, I addressed *The First Stone* and *The Lesbian Heresy*. Helen Garner and Sheila Jeffreys both unfavourably contrast the feminism of the 1970s with the feminism that they see as becoming dominant amongst young women in the 1990s. According to *The First Stone*, young feminists in the 1990s have apparently become fixated on sexual victimisation. According to *The Lesbian Heresy*, young women are rejecting the radical feminist model of gender hierarchy in favour of a poststructuralist analysis which understands gender to be voluntaristic. As a result, suggests Jeffreys, these young women are failing to see that heterosexuality is a key site of male domination and female subordination. For both Garner and Jeffreys, academic feminists are responsible for promoting politically dubious brands of feminism amongst young women. I have argued that these attacks on academic feminism mirror the broader attacks on ‘progressive’ academics by the New Right.

In the remaining chapters, I addressed a selection of texts that engage with feminist debates about sexually explicit cultural representations. In Chapter Four, I argued that Catharine Lumby’s book *Bad Girls* is politically promising because of the apparent inclusiveness of her feminism. Lumby claims to endorse an approach to sexually explicit media imagery which engages with a range of feminist (including ‘academic’ feminist) insights. Ultimately, however, Lumby suggests that her own libertarian and broadly poststructuralist feminism is beyond criticism. Evoking pornography debates from the U.S. and U.K., Lumby contrasts her feminism with an
‘anti-pornography’ feminism which she accuses of endorsing outdated and conservative gender stereotypes.

In Chapter Five, I addressed *Eat Me*. This text also concurs (to a large degree) with the argument that feminists who oppose pornography are puritanical and old-fashioned. Jaivin does, however, concur with feminists from a range of persuasions that sexually explicit fiction writing by women can have enormous political advantages. She argues that this literary sub-genre can enable women to express their own sexual fantasies, and that it can potentially act as one source of a global feminist ‘community’. I addressed *The River Ophelia* in Chapter Six. Many critics, and indeed even Ettler herself, framed this novel in terms of a conflict between feminist and literary generations. Conversely, I argued that the feminist politics of *The River Ophelia* are perhaps the most genuinely inclusive – or the least polarised - of all my selected texts. Importantly, too, Ettler’s novel is also framed as an Australian intervention into ‘overseas’ (namely American and French) debates and literary trends. This ‘transnational’ aspect of *The River Ophelia* has been consistently overlooked in the critical responses to the novel.

I have used my texts to demonstrate the complex ways that a variety of feminist perspectives on certain issues differ from and converge with one another, as well as with the New Right. In doing this, I have concurred with theorists such as David McKnight that the ‘culture wars’ have been as much about how different political perspectives have overlapped as how they differ from one another. Throughout the thesis, I have also investigated the ways in which these texts relocate or play out ‘overseas’ debates within an Australian context. I have done this with specific reference to Arjun Appadurai’s model of “global cultural flows”.

**Limitations and Further Areas of Inquiry**

As with any piece of research, this thesis is not without its limitations. I have not addressed works by migrant or Aboriginal women authors. The contributions these authors have made to ‘Australian writing’ and ‘Australian feminism’ have been far-reaching and profound. I recognise that I am contributing (however passively) to the marginalisation of these groups by not focusing on their literary output. I have not addressed all the issues that have been debated by feminists in recent decades. Issues
which I have not explored in this thesis include abortion, the feminisation of poverty, motherhood, women and armed conflict, women and disability, women’s mental health, and women’s rights in the workplace.

In relation to the question of generations, I have not explored the question of whether or not ‘young’ women are reluctant to identify as feminists. This question was raised by Rene Denfeld in *The New Victorians*, and remains topical with the recent (at the time of writing) publication of Monica Dux and Zora Simic’s book *The Great Feminist Denial* (2008). I have written from a pro-feminist male standpoint throughout this thesis, and many other men have adopted such a standpoint in their own research (see Jensen, 1997; Stoltenberg, 1992). There is a need for male writers to continue exploring how and why men can engage with feminist theory.

The culture wars did not conclude with the end of the 1990s. Neither did the feminist debates which my texts engage with. Even a cursory glance at Australian writing and media in the early twenty-first century suggests this. Sexual harassment and consent continue to be publicly debated (Albrechtsen, 2008). The continued topicality of sexually explicit fiction by women has been suggested by Nikki Gemmell’s widely-publicised novel *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003). Commentators such as Kath Albury have interrogated heterosexuality from a feminist perspective. I made reference to Albury’s book *Yes Means Yes* (2002) in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, I made reference to *The Porn Report*, which Albury co-wrote with Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee. This book addresses the consumption of pornography in contemporary Australia. *The Porn Report* received considerable media coverage when it was published in 2008 (see Thompson, 2008).

The ‘pornification’ or ‘sexualisation’ of culture has remained topical in Australia. 2008 saw public debates around the depiction of scantily-clad adolescents in the work of Melbourne photographer Bill Henson (Marr, 2008; Pendleton and Serisier, 2008). 2009 has seen the publication of *Getting Real*, a collection of essays about the ‘sexualisation’ of young girls in the media and popular culture. This book is published by Spinifex Press, which also published *The Lesbian Heresy*, and is edited by Melinda Tankard-Reist. Tankard-Reist is a former adviser to Brian Harradine, a conservative senator who I mentioned in Chapter Five, and she has ties with anti-pornography and anti-abortion
groups (see Newman, 2008; Tankard-Reist, 2008). Tankard-Reist’s mixed political and professional alliances say much about how blurred traditional political standpoints are becoming in the early twenty-first century.

Finally, I have engaged with academic research into feminism and Australian writing during the 1990s, but I have not thoroughly explored the myriad changes that these areas of research have undergone in recent years. Since the 1990s, there has been an increasingly prolific body of research by a diversity of feminists, and these notably include Aboriginal and postcolonial feminists (Robinson, 2000). At the same time, the renaming of ‘Women’s Studies’ to ‘Gender Studies’ in many Australian universities has prompted accusations that feminism has become more and more silenced in the academy (Hawthorne, 2004). Recent academic research into Australian writing has emphasised the increasingly “transnational” nature of this writing (Gelder, 2005). As with researchers in other humanities disciplines, researchers into Australian writing have also felt market-related pressures. They have been faced with the question of how their research can benefit – or at least have relevance within – “an increasingly global economy” (Ibid).

This thesis does not provide the final word on ‘Australian writing’, ‘Australian feminism’, ‘the culture wars’ or ‘globalisation’. In this thesis, I have pointed to a historical moment when these phenomena became complexly and fascinatingly enmeshed. The texts that I have addressed are not simply a collection of controversial books about sex and power. They are not simply accounts of conflicts between feminists of different generations or political persuasions. These texts signal the rapidly changing political landscape in Australia between 1993 and 1997. They suggest that this moment in time is hugely important on a historical, political and cultural level.
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**Discography**


**Films, Television Programs and Music Videos**

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Scarlet Street. Dir. Fritz Lang. Universal, 1945

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