

# New Flesh, New Struggles

Michelle O'Brien, January 2004

I wrote this essay as a submission for *Bound to Struggle*, an anthology my friend Simon is putting together on kink and radical politics. He hasn't yet had a chance to read it, but he gave me permission to share it with others. At least on the surface, it's definitely the riskiest piece up on my website. Porn and kink aren't exactly controversy-free topics, even among my fellow revolutionary trans feminists. Oh well. I hope you all enjoy it.

*"Yes," it's more a breath than a word, a sigh I let out as she slides the needle into my shoulder. Its pain bites, twists around my trace of voice. I feel the pain wrapping itself tightly around the intake of breath and then releasing, uncoiling as I moan. I feel her fingers trace lines on my neck, the cool metal thread of another needle gracing my cheek before she runs it through the cartilage of my ear. This time it grabs me, lines of sensation running out and across my body. These needles, their pain is staking out a new map, creating a new terrain on this surface of my body, creating in its wake new flesh and new hope. And somehow, in the midst of this transformation, this restructuring of my flesh and its possibilities, I am beginning to find myself.*

*Next to the bed she has set my sharps container, nearly full of my 21 gauge hormone syringes. In the morning I will bike down to the needle exchange, chat with my friends that work the Saturday site, and get a new pack of points. I know the exchange workers from my volunteering with them, from social service organizing in town, and occasionally from dyke parties. Unfortunately, the exchange doesn't carry needles for play piercing.*

I spent the winter of Y2K in Minneapolis. The winter was cold, as they always are. Vicious winds whipped through streets and sidewalks, grabbing our bundled bodies, leaving the tiny ice scars on the surface of our faces and eyes. It was an exciting time. I had spent the spring before traveling in anarchist and communist squats on the continent in Europe. In Rome, an autonomist told me to link arms as we charged a US embassy, hitting a line of the squat Carabinieri vans. In Barcelona, I watched police cars turn and drive away, as we spread out across a blocked highway, chanting "You take our homes, we take your streets!" in Catalan. In London I sat with Greek anarchists for days behind a high barricade of classroom desks; watching the campus security guards

outside parole our student protest turned siege. When I returned to the States, things were changing quickly. N30 hit in Seattle, and for the first time I began to seriously imagine the ways street militancy might allow us to seize, hold and defend our dear, beloved cities. Through that winter I organized street protest trainings, teach kids the tactics I had learned in Europe and Seattle. We practiced breaking police lines, sucking people back into crowds, staying linked and staying strong. We were preparing ourselves for A16 in DC, for the upcoming May Day in Minneapolis, for fantasies of mass street insurrection.

We were training our bodies to protest. Our trainings were rooms full of bodies – but not just any bodies. These workshops shared the demographics of too many of the protests of that year -- they were mostly white kids, the young middle class that could afford an arrest or two, able-bodies who could run if it came to that, bodies that were not visibly trans or queer. We trained rooms full of privileged bodies to stand against the police and defend each other, to meet power with a certain privileged courage.

We enlisted our bodies for high-profile battles of street protests, while other, less visible wars waged across other kinds of bodies. During 1999 and 2000, downtown construction workers were building a new downtown jail; not to house protesters, but the bodies of young black, native and Latino men. One Minneapolis public school librarian, a trans woman named Debra Davis, faced the wrath of transphobic parents and administrators over her right to use a bathroom. Within the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 17, immigrant activists led a successful campaign to change the national AFL-CIO's official stance on the rights of immigrants; while the fought off a brutal alliance of the INS and hotel owners. And in the streets of Minneapolis, like in cities across the world, many faced daily harassment regardless of any protest. Sex workers, trans people, drug users, homeless people and others fought a constant battle for survival, against poverty, hatred, violence and police harassment. Wars over bodies: their survival, their control, their movement, their visibility, and their worth.

While organizing street protests, jail solidarity and lock downs, I was also in another struggle; one I wasn't talking much about. I was dating, and at 21 had one of my first remotely functional sexual relationships. At the time, most read me as a fag, a boy, and a bit odd. My girlfriend was a butch queer woman who liked me, in part, because she read me as femme. In our sex, our day to day moments together, I began to unravel years of confused anxiety, a tangled mess of incomprehensibility that wrapped itself around my body. Slowly, I began to heal from years of trauma; from an alienation from my body and self so

massive and deep I couldn't begin to grasp it. I found new ways of understanding and reading my body, new possibilities glimpsed in a pleasurable caress, in our flirtatious exchanges. Sometime early in that winter I began to seriously consider the possibility that I was a woman.

*"How bad do you want it? Come on bitch, tell me, how bad do you want it?"*

*"So bad." Her voice is coarse, desperate, saturated with desire. I tug the scarf tightly, tying her wrist restraints to the metal rings that surround my bed. I run the suede of the flogger across her back and thighs, listening to her breath quicken. She bends her knees, and her ass is in the air. Her hair is wet with sweat, dangling over her face. She is waiting with an intensity that fills the room, an intensity that I can feel across the surface of my own skin.*

*She wants me. She really wants me. And it has so little to do with what's between my legs.*

As that winter gave way into spring, I moved out of Minneapolis. I soon came out as trans, and began a different trajectory of struggle and resistance. Every day I fought to make sense of my body, to sort through years of accumulated self-hatred and fear. I kept working with anarchists – joining protesters through another two May Days in Portland, doing prisoner solidarity organizing with an anarchist collective, finding myself from one punk house to another across cities and years.

Slowly, I tried to understand the ways my self-hatred, my lack of connection to my body and my extreme discomfort with my sex and gender informed and structured the kinds of organizing I chose to do. Militant street protesting was linked within me to my desperate, confused desire to connect to something, to somehow be present in this flesh. My fantasies of armed struggle, I realized, were connected to my lack of desire to live and my basic fear of this life and body of mine. As I withdrew myself from some forms of organizing, new ones opened up. The real battle felt like it was on the surface of this flesh. It was a struggle to come to terms with a new way of being in the world with this body that was so very wrong.

Eventually I started hormones and it became clear I wouldn't ever voluntarily go to jail again. I started valuing my own life, and visions of violent revolution became more remote, complex and frightening. I stopped being willing of playing the game of legitimacy of gender and politics against sexist male activists. I began to realize that if I was going to be a part of a revolution, I'd have to begin by figuring out myself, and understanding this body that exceeds my words, that eludes their categories, that demands a world beyond my imagination. For this, kink

was absolutely crucial.

The languages I had learned to describe my body were hopelessly useless and destructive. I needed to find myself, connect to myself, reimagine myself -- and for this, I desperately needed a different way of marking and mapping this flesh. I saw how deeply unsustainable and self-destructive my organizing had long been. I wanted to find ways of being true to myself, and hence true to revolutionary struggle. Staying strong in struggles against genocide and domination called on me, more than anything at this moment of my life, to simply heal. It was through kink I began to let go of this trauma, and find physical languages to understand this body that opened onto new, liberating ways of being and healing.

It was in sex, more than anywhere, I learned about myself. My repulsion from most genital-based sex began to make sense, and I started to sort out other forms of desire and possibility. If my body would never be normal, never have quite the right genitals, never fully fit into the regime of properly sexed humans, what could pleasure mean? I needed new languages of sensation and intimacy to understand how I could be attractive, how I could give and receive pleasure, how I could live my body with others.

My sexual practices in BDSM taught me ways of being with my body that wasn't about normative gender. They offered sexual codes that weren't reducible to genitals, that didn't immediately reinscribe my body in codes that made no sense. They helped untangle me from the criss-crossed maps of self-hatred and self-destruction that stripped my body from myself. In transforming my flesh and my desire into a complex landscape of unexpected pleasure, BDSM offered a means of loving myself as trans, in loving my body as genderqueer. In the intensity, desires and passions of bondage, pain and domination, I found that I was sexy and beautiful, capable of connection and joy. I found that I could heal, and with that healing return to the world proud and strong.

*"Is there a hankie color for gender freaks?" Ze asks, watching me as I carefully fold the black and white checkered handkerchief. I shrug, smile.*

*"No, I don't think so. All the codes I learned are for actions, for things you do with someone. I don't think they are usually about identities or what sort of body you have. Anyone though could wear any hanky. If it's what they are into." I meet hir eyes; we smile for a moment and turn away. Through hours of processing, we agreed to try to keep the sexual tension a bit lower in our friendship.*

*"That's interesting," ze says after a moment. "So you're gender or genitals don't matter." We both knew in the actual leather scenes in town,*

*both mattered a great deal. But we were talking about something deeper. We were talking about what these codes and practices meant for us. How we came to leather across the strange terrain of our bodies, a complex map of a very different world of gender.*

*"Exactly."*

In kink I learned ways of loving and appreciating my new, changing body. I developed the confidence it took to start hormones, to be out as trans, to demand my space as a woman. In leather I understood that I could be an extraordinary, incredibly hot dyke creature that had no need for a body that rigidly conformed to gender expectations. This confidence and the changes it brought led into new kinds of organizing, into different ways of linking my body to politics.

I only occasionally take the streets these days, and only when the risk of arrest feels remote. Instead I've spent the last year organizing around health care access for trans people. Slowly we've been trying to build cross-racial and cross-coalitions among Philadelphia's trans communities, linking this to struggles waged by prisoners, sex workers and active drug users. From reforming the shelter system to supporting the needle exchange, from speaking on anti-trans violence to writing about self-determination in health care choices, I'm finding ways of building movements that allow the complexities of my body and identity to be fully present.

As my sexual practice has taught me ways of loving and reimagining my body in its myriad of contradictions, I've strove to bring the awareness, clarity and pleasure of kink to my organizing.

*"What do you want? What turns you on?" The desire in her voice collects under her fingertips as she caresses my neck. I've never realized a collarbone could be so intensely erotic.*

*That's the question, isn't it? We're fighting a war of liberation on these streets and in our hearts, fighting an old battle over the terrain of our new bodies. What do I want? Who am I? What am I doing in this world? What am I fighting for? What, do tell, turns me on?*

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