This issue invites us to consider examples of feminist cultural production that use music, graphic art, and film to resist sexual conventions. Andrea Wood turns our attention to lesbian sex and romance in comics, a genre that has long captivated lay readers and is gaining popularity in academic circles. Rachel Lumsden analyzes Ethel Smyth’s 1913 musical composition “Possession,” an ode to same-sex intimacy displaying a “sonic meld” of passion, desire, and political commitment. Sharmila Lodhia’s account of Nina Paley’s film *Sita Sings the Blues* considers how a sexually charged animated representation of a traditional epic can spur battles over cultural authenticity. Ariane Cruz examines how sexual pleasure presses against racist histories in a study on black women and BDSM. Whether sexuality is policed, as Chloë Taylor explores in her article, or the policing of sexuality is shunned, as Lynn Comella addresses in her review essay, it is clear that the grip of sexual politics on women’s sexual lives is strong. Wang Zheng’s News and Views piece recounts recent global feminist tactics used to release five young feminists jailed in China, an urgent reminder about how women’s bodies are policed in violent ways.

We begin this issue with Chloë Taylor’s essay reflecting on how sexology and psychiatry function to represent female desire in narrow ways. Taylor explores how female sexual dysfunction is constructed in sexology and psychiatric practice and locates this as part of a longer history of rendering selected bodies and sexual practices as deviant. Her analysis is a valuable rejoinder to the ever-expanding grip of psychiatry on the ordering—and disordering—of women’s bodies and sexuality. The line between normal and abnormal is always shifting, but its constant is how it maneuvers and is maneuvered to control female sexual desire. Taylor’s argument moves toward a non-normalizing feminist sexology that can interrogate sexual practice and function without rendering any as “right” or “wrong.”
Andrea Wood also turns to female sexuality, specifically lesbian sex, love, and romance, in her article on comics as a literary genre. Lesbian romance comics, Wood argues, offer a different discursive lens for “making the invisible visible.” Using queer theory to interrogate romantic depictions of lesbian sex and sexuality, she explores how the visual narrative form of comics allows for a different and politically compelling depiction of lesbian identity and sexual activity. Although lesbian romance and same-sex desire has been an interest of many feminist scholars, few have examined the visual field of lesbian comics—a genre, Wood insists, that demonstrates resistance to what Adrienne Rich identified as “compulsory heterosexuality.”

Rachel Lumsden draws our attention to composer Ethel Smyth’s understudied song “Possession.” The song is a rumination on what it means to possess something or someone, and what it means to be possessed; it is also a song that Smyth dedicated to Emmeline Pankhurst, her political comrade as well as her close friend and muse. Lumsden reads the song as a creative, strategically ambiguous “ode to an intimate female relationship,” a tribute to the respect, affection, and tenderness that Pankhurst and Smyth shared. Rather than reveal the “truth” of Smyth’s relationship with Pankhurst, Lumsden instead invites readers to consider the “sonic meld” of “Possession” as a space through which “themes of desire, activism, eroticism, solidarity, and sacrifice coalesce and congeal” and as a site through which Smyth narrated her experiences, passions, desires, and political commitments.

Sharmila Lodhia engages the controversy surrounding Nina Paley’s re-telling of the Ramayana in her film Sita Sings the Blues, which some critics have deemed “offensive,” “insulting,” and a “desecration of the Ramayana and the Hindu faith.” Lodhia treats Paley’s film—which positions Sita rather than Ram as the story’s protagonist, deploys animation and myriad narrator perspectives, fuses Paley’s own story with Sita’s story, and sets the story to a 1920s blues soundtrack—as a productive “body of critique about the epic’s central teachings on virtue, righteousness, and idealized gender roles.” By situating Paley’s retelling of the Ramayana in the context of numerous and varied Ramayana retellings, Lodhia reveals that Sita Sings the Blues is a “creative engagement” with religious iconography, one that shows the “challenging and the transformative potential of this timeless story.” In this light, the sharp critiques of Sita Sings the Blues are forms of “patriarchal ownership of certain
types of cultural property” and indicative of the anxieties that circulate when cultural forms travel across cultural borders.

Ariane Cruz investigates the dense circuits of meaning generated when sexual pleasure and racist histories collide. For Cruz, black women’s practices of BDSM, particularly BDSM race-play, can be rich sites where black female sexuality is unleashed alongside violence, where histories of violence and trauma “lubricate” pleasure, and where black women can access, wield, and critique power. If, Cruz argues, race is something that always “plays us,” then BDSM race-play makes visible the performative pleasures and injuries of race, the complex choreographies of desire and violence that mark interracial encounters, and the capacity of race to both demean and electrify. Moreover, BDSM race-play reveals that we are all players in the elaborate racial choreography of everyday life and that we are all situated and implicated in racial hierarchies. Race play, then, makes explicit the complicated fantasies, fictions, and violence that underpin race and offers a pleasurable stage to “reimagine scenes of Black/White sexual intimacy.”

Lynn Comella’s review essay “Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars” reveals the continuing difficulties in feminist conversations about female sexuality, pornography, and BDSM. She reviews Carolyn Bronstein’s Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976–1986, Julia Long’s Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism, and the edited volume spread: The Best of the Magazine that Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution. She finds that all three underscore interpretive frameworks we have inherited from the so-called sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s, and that “one of the most significant legacies of the feminist sex wars [is] that media messages matter and that the stories they produce can be reworked to communicate alternative sexual possibilities and political visions of the world.”

The interplay between pleasure and danger, which is at the heart of the material that Comella examines, is creatively rendered in Kawika Guillermo’s short story “Libido Ergo Sum,” which is set in Las Vegas. In a “News and Views” contribution, Wang Zheng recounts the dangers faced by five feminist women in China who protested sexual harassment on public buses and trains and were detained for a month by the Chinese government. This short piece reminds us that feminist activism poses threats even to apparently strong authoritarian governments and that vibrant feminist mobilization across social and traditional media can
achieve successes. As identities, sexualities, and bodies are policed around the world, this issue reminds us of which identities can — and cannot — move with ease. It invites us to consider what we hear and see around us, how we interpret those sounds and images as powerful, empowering, or disempowering — and it also invites us to understand why.

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