

WOMAN ENERGY

HOW OUR LESBIAN PAST INFORMS OUR LESBIAN FUTURE

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Summer 2017



SINISTER WISDOM

The cover of *Sinister Wisdom* 3, Spring 1977, featuring art by Tee Corinne.

Sinister Wisdom
A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal
www.SinisterWisdom.org

Spring 1977 offered Volume 1, Issue 3 of *Sinister Wisdom: a Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women*. The upper half of the cover frames a two-toned photographic-negative print of two nude women in an embrace: one woman reclining, held in the arms of her lover. The lover cradles the reclined figure, one arm clutching around her neck to meet her lips, the other arm, an arrow between her lover's open thighs with the entirety of her hand, disappearing into the darkness of the horizontal negative exposure; wisps of layered cropped hair dance at the lightest sections of the image, exclaiming a paucity of stillness. This image by lesbian artist Tee Corrine is also held in the Graphics Collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the world's largest and oldest lesbian archive. Selected among hundreds of graphic images, a blow-up print of the *Sinister Wisdom* 1(3) cover is a part of a traveling exhibition, titled *Graphic Activism*. At a New York event held by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in 2016, *Graphic Activism* co-curator, Dr. Flavia Rando, described the Tee Corrine cover art as a "part of a series of prints on women with physical difficulties, making love."

I see the iconic Tee Corrine print and its 1977 *Sinister Wisdom* debut as a timestamp of lesbian culture, representing a quest for visibility mediated through the desire of women. This same 1977 issue featured an article by poet, Adrienne Rich, titled, "It is the lesbian in us..." which speaks to today's presumption by young scholars of a cohesive lesbian and lesbian-feminist past. Rich writes, "The word 'lesbian' must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence, the closet-game, the creation of the *unspeakable*." Both Corrine's photographic print, highlighting differently abled bodies, and Rich's essay on language,

Anticipating *Sinister Wisdom's* Croning in 2026: Part 1 of 10.

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speak to a contemporary divisiveness in the queer community where some political formations reject any claim to the term "lesbian," silencing women-identified young and older people who claim identities through the desire of women.

To respond to silencing of lesbian collective identities, organizations like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and conferences like the Black Lesbian Conference, create public programming with the word "Lesbian" in the title. These actions ensure visibility of a nuanced lesbian consciousness – one that is described by Harriet Desmoines on page 28 of the very first issue of *Sinister Wisdom* in "Notes" under "Who-o-o-o is a Lesbian?" as, "everytime a woman draws a circle around her psyche, saying 'this is a room of my own' and then writes from within that 'room,' she is inhabiting a lesbian consciousness."

A Lebanese lesbian, in New York since 2008, MJ Corey, contacted me by email. My early thirties Assistant Professor self met her in my midtown NYC office, and her early twenties fresh out of college self arrived with a hand-held digital camera wanting to interview me for her documentary on lesbian identity. The summary of her questions asked, "what was it like, 'the community,' and being a part of it, now that is has been completely dismantled?" Her questions also asked, "what should I do with the fear I harbor for wanting lesbian-only space?" She was genuinely afraid to misspeak, to misstep, or misuse language. She was afraid to reveal the *wanting* she held for a taste of what Julia Stanley in the first *Sinister Wisdom* issue described on page 6 as "woman energy... Energy. That simple. Women had energy." The conversation ended in tears from both of us.

I wanted so badly to tell her, "Oh, but you are mistaken! – the women never actually had it figured out!" or rather, "I wasn't there either. And ultimately, I don't identify as a feminist, but a black, lesbian, separatist, which puts me in a very solitary lonely place, not searching for a fallacy of community, and content in the lack of expectation." Instead, we just dried our eyes, a closeness between us, conjured from the shared distance. Days later, I sent her links to the early issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. "In your larger quest to find answers to a 'current state' of silence and lesbianism within queer communities, this may respond to what you are looking for." I wrote. "I think it speaks to the presumed assumption of a cohesive lesbian feminist past." When she opened the link, I knew it would open to Tee Corrine's print: differently abled women whose energized desire disappeared into the darkness.

'It is the lesbian in us ...'

—adrienne rich

I was born in 1929. In that year, Virginia Woolf was writing of the necessity for a literature that would reveal "that vast chamber where nobody has been"--the realm of relationships between women.

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language--this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*.

Two women, one white, one Black, were the first persons I loved and who I knew loved me. Both of them sang me my first songs, told me my first stories, became my first knowledge of tenderness, passion, and, finally, rejection. Each of them, over time, surrendered me to the judgment and disposition of my father and my father's culture: white and male. My love for the white woman and the Black woman became blurred with anger, contempt and guilt. I did not know which of them had injured me; they became merged together in my inarticulate fury. I did not know that neither of them had had a choice. Nor did I know that what had happened between us--and among us--was important. It was *unspeakable*.

My father's library I felt as the source and site of his power. I was right. It contained Plutarch and Havelock Ellis, Ovid and Spinoza, Swinburne and Emerson. In that library I came to believe--a child's belief, but also a poet's--that language, writing, those pages of print, could teach me how to live, could tell me *what was possible*. But, on the subject of woman-to-woman relationships, in Emily Dickinson's words: "My Classics veiled their faces". (And still, in most literature courses, most libraries, syllabi, curricula, young women are handed classics that veil, not only what might be possible, but what has been going on all along.)

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