

READING *SINISTER WISDOM* FROM 1983 IN 2024

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Sinister Wisdom 22/23: *A Gathering of Spirit* was guest edited by Beth Brant and is filled with the voices of North American Indian women. The act of gathering spirit is a transformative one, with the issue itself precipitating the transfiguration of the individual voice into a people's voice. Each narrative carries a kernel of all the others within it, all without losing the individuation that has so often been denied to Native women, in America and around the Earth. In her introduction, Brant describes her own transformation, from her decision to undertake the role of editor—overcoming the self-doubts regarding her ability that plagued her—to the all-consuming tasks of her editorial duties: “My life became measured by The Issue. It had taken over. It had become my work” (6).

In *Sinister Wisdom* 22/23: *A Gathering of Spirit*, the conception of personhood solely about individualism and imposed by white society is transformed and transcended. Women writing in this issue are not merely a singular person of a particular age and time; they carry within them, in memory and experience, the histories of the Native women who came before. History is a living presence in many of the narratives, even taking on the tangible form of a quilt in Linda Hogan's “New Shoes”

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(21). The quilt, an incomplete record of Sullie's life, is the physical manifestation of the generational havoc violence can wreak. It is a metaphor for severed lives, showing how one life cut short—the quilt maker, Rena's—causes a diminishment in the lives of those around her, those left behind.

Other narratives, like Debra Swallow's "A White Man's Word" (36), illustrate the repetitiveness of history. Here, battles already fought by one generation rise from the dead, haunting the present anew. Swallow, having reckoned with the violence of a slur during her own childhood, is once again, "eighteen years later" (37), confronted with the same dehumanising term, this time levelled at her son. Yet, despite this, there is the endurance of pride. A spirit undiminished by needing to fight the same fight. "The way of living is Indian. You're Lakota." (37) Swallow repeats to her son what her father once told her. After all, "It's just a white man's word." (38)

Sinister Wisdom 22/23: A Gathering of Spirit asserts autonomy for Native American women. Native women's voices pry their history from the strangling hands of white society. This gesture is particularly poignant in Terri Meyette's poem, "Celebration 1982" (50-51). Almost every stanza starts with the incriminating line, "They say no one died" (50). Meyette confronts lies with truth, exposing the inherent violence of settler-colonial America and the complete apathy of colonists that has allowed the destruction of Native peoples and land. Yet Mayette does not view history through the lens of domination, rather she sees it through that of survival. An important reminder in this *Sinister Wisdom* issue that Native and First Nations Peoples' fight for their own liberation has a long history, one that needs to be remembered and continued.

A *Gathering of Spirit* also speaks to the interconnections between land, life, and personhood. Works such as Marilou Awiakta's "Amazons in Appalachia" (114), Vickie Sears' "Pow Wow," (124), and Carol Lee Sanchez's "Sex, Class and Race Intersections/Visions of Women of Color," (150) conceptualise Earth not only as the giver of life, but as an extension of the self.

Joy Harjo's poem "From the Salt Lake City Airport – 82" (145) echoes this ontological framing, positing a feminism with decolonisation at its core. Harjo invokes the sentience of the land and its ties to First Nations societies across North America. This symbiosis is situated in stark contrast to white, patriarchal society, which is instead underpinned by a logic of conquest, environmental extractivism and a denial of the life-power that women embody. Harjo describes a culture predicated on the erasure of Indigeneity, a culture alienated from land and life itself: "They build a city of separation. / Grew children / and named them names of men, / another language / not the land" (145). However, the poet envisions hope for an Indigenous feminist futurity, maintaining that liberation from these structures of oppression hinges on the empowerment of Indigeneity and the feminine:

The earth does break open and spill by the quakings of the heart
by forces other than man.

The lake of salt that floats

West of here feeds you.

She is the womb of your discomfort, your mother, a ghost
you could easily disrupt (147).

A *Gathering of Spirit* is particularly resonant in the context of so-called Australia—the land on which both of us live, work and create—and probes reflections on our own

positionalities as settlers living on unceded First Nations' lands. The issue calls us to reckon with the ways in which we are implicated in a structure marked by an ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Despite decades of advocacy, no treaties have been signed with any First Nations communities on this continent. In a referendum held in late 2023, so-called Australia rejected a proposal to create a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to parliament. In this political climate, many of the themes underpinning *A Gathering of Spirit* are just as urgent now as they were in 1983. The issue reiterates our responsibility as settlers to “listen” (153).

1983 was the final year of Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich's editorship of *Sinister Wisdom*. Together they published eight issues over three years. In *Sinister Wisdom* 24, their final co-edited issue, Cliff and Rich interrogated the process of transformation through the lens of working class im/mobility. It was a fitting parting gift, one that upheld their desire to “encourage dialogue among women across all assumed/existing boundaries” (4).

Traversing class boundaries, the narratives and contributors to *Sinister Wisdom* 24 exemplify Cliff's synthesis of radical change, particularly through the interplay between class and language. In many of the narratives, upward mobility transforms the individual's relationship to language and language use. In others, language and voice dispels silence to change circumstances, to imagine more expansive futures. But nuance is never sacrificed; contributors constantly grapple with the mutability of language and its ability to both harm and heal.

“But you were inaccessible to me in your silence,” (35) Cheiron Sariko McMahill laments in “I Ching” (33), exploring the disparity between working and middle/ruling classes. Kat—to whom the piece is dedicated to—

and McMahill no longer speak in the same words. This class rift is exemplified in how language is spoken and in how they are spoken to and about. McMahill, wading in the “White river” (35), is buoyed by language of opportunity and movement. Kat is exposed only to a language of immobility. Sue Dove Gambill and Rachel deVries’ “Rediscovering the Heart” (41) further expounds on this disparity in language use between the working and middle classes. Through their lived experiences, Gambill and deVries observed how working-class language is “direct, active, immediate” (47). It is a language that is sensual and close to the subject, as opposed to the “lack of emotionality” (50) brought about by an “analytical, reflective, (and) passive” (47) middle-class parlance. *Rediscovering the Heart* is an act of healing. Through conversation, Gambill and deVries mend the divide they felt from their working-class background by embracing what they once felt shame for—the vulnerability and emotional acuity of their working-class voice.

In the acerbic and satirical “Class Acts” (36), Sherry Sylvester renders the condescension and ignorance of the middle-class towards the working-class experience. In Sylvester’s play, the working-class women, like the Native women in *A Gathering of Spirit*, are spoken of and for by those holding more privilege. Towards the end of scene six, Sylvester shows how working-class narratives and perspectives are given only a token gesture of recognition by ‘liberation’ and ‘progressive’ movements. “The Left speaks (for the working-class). The Women’s Movement speaks (for the working-class). The Voice from the otherside (speaks for the working-class). The middle-class speaks (for the working-class).” (39) The working-class here is voiceless, not even a character in their own story. What is most striking—particularly in the age of slumming

in cities enamoured with the aesthetics of poverty and hardship, without doing anything to alleviate the problem—is Sylvester’s insistence on recognising the material differences separating the working from the middle class. “(D)on’t tell me you’re broke when you’re forced to live on your savings, Sylvester admonishes the audience in the closing scene. (D)on’t tell me how you’re working class ‘cause you have a waitress job when you also have a law degree” (39). Sylvester leaves us with a searing reminder never to co-opt the working-class woman’s voice.

Weaving intergenerationality with intertextuality, Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Waulking Song” (135) is an ode to working-class butch-femme love. In her introduction to the piece, Pratt writes about how “the meanings of (the song’s) syllables have been lost” (135). Once more, generations of working women’s language and culture is destroyed. But with her poetry, Pratt imbues the song with new life and meaning. The poem is an odyssey, a traversal through violence and its aftermath, and the tender caring provided by a femme to her butch so that they may both survive the journey. After all, the spelling of waulking/walking is interchangeable. The process of waulking itself was meant to purify the woollen weave, and to simultaneously make the fabric both softer and more durable. “Many times I had held her and felt her heart beating beneath that thin cloth.” (135) Here, the K-Mart cotton plaid shirt of her butch lover’s is an armour pierced by “the man with the knife” (136). And through her description of the tearing and soiling of the plaid fabric, Pratt shows us the violence often experienced by visibly lesbian individuals. “He jerked at her shirt and ripped the seams/ He cut the buttons off one by one/ The red of her blood crossed the plaid of her

shirt" (136). Yet there is no acquiescence from either Pratt or her lover. She "washed the shirt, put it away" (136), and though it lay "folded, unmended, in (Pratt's) drawer" (138), it was never "thrown away". Instead, the butch lover is transformed, changes herself to survive, and perhaps to revel once more in Pratt's touch. "She has made herself strong", Pratt declares. "He would not ruin what we had made" (139). With her poetry, Pratt carries on the traditions of the Hebridean working women. Their songs live on, altered now by the voice Pratt uses to sing to her butch.

Using their voices, the writers and artists in *Sinister Wisdom* in 1983 create the beginnings of the revolution which has allowed the survival of lesbian/feminist/women/queer enterprises like *Sinister Wisdom*. At the end of the year, Cliff and Rich passed the editorial baton to Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Michael Uccella. It was not merely a changing of hands. It was also a keeping of their promise to *pass on the life of the magazine*. Through these issues of *Sinister Wisdom*, a consciousness of lesbian/queer/woman power is born, and with it, a renewed sense of resolve, a reaffirmation of our lives. These issues offer distinct yet interlocked bodies of work that expand the political terrain of lesbian discourse, shedding light on the multiplicity of lesbian voices, cultures and histories.

Reflecting on the moment in 1983, Rich described in the "Notes for a Magazine" (3-5), "a period of deepening and expanding politics for many North American lesbians" (5), which followed "a time of constraint and instability" (4), particularly for women/lesbian/feminist enterprises. But as Cliff asked in her own introduction to *Sinister Wisdom* 24, "have there ever been really good times for enterprises that want to change the way in which the world is viewed?" (7)



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