

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 43/44 Teaching Guide

Sinister Wisdom Teaching Guides ***Sinister Wisdom 43/44: 15th Anniversary Retrospective***

Summary:

Sinister Wisdom 43/44: The 15th Anniversary Retrospective, published in Summer 1991, features work documenting lesbian herstory from the first forty-two issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. This issue considers what it means to be a lesbian, privilege and discrimination within the lesbian community, being silenced and closeted, cross-cultural lesbian love, aging lesbians, violence against women, the lesbian body, and lesbian mental and physical illness. Notable lesbian writers included are Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Julia Penelope, Barbara Grier, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Achy Obejas, Marilyn Frye, and Elana Dykewomon.

Themes:

Themes and correlated writing in *Sinister Wisdom 43/44: The 15th Anniversary Retrospective*

- What it means to be a lesbian
 - “What is a Lesbian?” p. 10-12 is a compilation of the various definitions of what it means to be a lesbian provided by past contributors.
 - “From a Cursory and Percursory History of Language, and the Telling of It” by Julia Penelope p. 13-14 explores the feminist movement, why it happened, and what it meant for lesbians.
- The detriments of silence and closetism in the lesbian community
 - “Lesbians and Literature” by June Arnold and Susan Griffin p. 17-21, an MLA conference panel.
 - “From Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by Julia Penelope, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich p. 39-49, an MLA conference panel.
 - “From Anonymity and the Denial of Self” by Michelle Cliff p. 106, an essay.
 - “Power and Helplessness in the Women’s Movement” by Joanna Russ p. 146-154, an essay that discusses why it is important for lesbians to speak up and write about their experiences, and the consequences of being silent.
 - “From Neither Profit nor Salvation by Barbara Grier” p. 35-38, the keynote speech at the 1977 Women’s Week Festival at San Jose State University, defines closetism and articulates the importance of coming out.
- Lesbian labels and stigmas
 - “Mariam” by Pat Suncircle p. 50-56 is a story that demonstrates how the term, ‘dyke,’ has been used as a label for the lesbian community.
 - “In America they call us Dykes: notes on the etymology and usage of ‘dyke’” by JR Roberts p. 71-79 is another discussion on the usage of the term ‘dyke’ as a lesbian label.
 - “Don’t Call Me Crazy” by Rebecca Ripley p. 299-300 addresses the detrimental effects of labels and stigmas in lesbian culture.

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- “Therapism and the Taming of the Lesbian Community” by Joan M. Ward p. 301-308 responds to the labels and stigmas placed on lesbians because of psychological assault and institutionalization.
- Violence
 - “Violence, Victimization and Violation” by Sarah Lucia Hoagland p. 139-142 discusses why lesbians are subject to violence.
 - “Women and Violence” by Melanie Kay/Kantrowitz p. 80-84 addresses the violence lesbians face.
- Ageism in the lesbian community
 - “Do You Remember Me?” by Barbara MacDonald p. 85-89 explores the ageism that lesbians encounter.
 - “Surviving and More: Interview with Mabel Hampton” by Joan Nestle p. 90-94 documents the issue of ageism within the lesbian community.
- Lesbian herstory
 - “An Interview with Joan and Deborah of the Lesbian Herstory Archives” by Beth Hodges p. 95-105 covers the importance of documenting lesbian herstory.
 - “Culture Making: Lesbian Classics in the Year 2000?” by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz p. 107-111 discusses current and future issues that surround the documentation of lesbian herstory.
- Racism
 - “Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics” by Elly Bulkin p. 114-135 discusses homophobia and racism.
 - “Who is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism” by Paula Gunn Allen p. 224-236 articulates the lack of support for Native Americans identities
 - “Class” by Caryatis Cardea p.293-294 is a poem about white feminists and class privilege.
- Vulnerability between lesbians
 - “Vulnerability and Power” by Sarah Lucia Hoagland p.155-157 explores the importance of being vulnerable with other lesbians.
 - “Llorona” by Achy Obejas p. 158-159 is a poem about crying and vulnerability.
- Lesbian separatism
 - “Some Reflections on Separatism and Power” by Marilyn Frye p. 176-177.
 - “Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?” by Adrienne Rich p. 178-179.
 - “Responses to Adrienne Rich’s ‘Notes for a Magazine’” by Barbara Smith, Sidney Spinster, and Lois Anne Addison p. 180-183.
- The lesbian body
 - “A Spoiled Identity” by Martha Courtot p. 211-216 is a sponsored speech delivered at Sonoma State University in 1982.
 - “Menu for an Unassuageable Hunger” by Jennifer Green Woodhull p. 240-244 comments on body shaming that some lesbians face.

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- “The Real Fat Women Poems” by Elana Dykewomon p. 245-253, is a poem that explores how body shaming is inherent to the lesbian community.
- **Illness**
 - “Pelvic Mass Etiology” by Barbara Ruth p. 285-287, a poem.
 - “A/Part of the Community” by Naja Sorella p. 288-292, an essay about how Environmental Illness and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in the lesbian community received less attention than AIDS did.

Discussion Questions:

1. What visions of lesbian identity are offered in this collection? How do these visions resonate with your experience?
2. How has the dynamic of the lesbian community changed through the years? Is the lesbian community the same now as compared to what is offered in this publication?
3. What history does this retrospective issue document? Have you encountered other places that have documented aspects of lesbian history? If so, where, but if not, why not? What other minority groups often do not get documented in history books? Why is it important to document and record history from minority groups? Why, specifically, is lesbian history important?
4. What pieces in this issue speak to you the most? What emotions and memories do these pieces cause you to think about?
5. What is a retrospective? Why would a journal compile a retrospective issue? How do editors select which writing to feature?

Key Words:

- **herstory** – history written from a female and feminist perspective in order to emphasize history from the point of view of women.
- **coming out of the closet (coming out)** – a metaphor for members of the LGBTQ community for when they disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- **closetism** – a word coined by Barbara Grier to convey how LGBTQ people are not always 100 percent ‘out’ (fully reveal their sexual identity or gender expression to everyone all of the time); for instance, they may be out to some friends and family but not to other family members or their employers.
- **dyke** – a slang term for ‘lesbian;’ can, depending on the context of its use or affirmative, be offensive.
- **homophobia** – the strong dislike, fear, and discrimination of homosexual people.
- **lesbian separatism** – Marilyn Frye defines it as a “separation of various sorts of modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege – this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women” (Frye 176).

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Unit Teaching Activity Ideas:

1. Secrets – and Revealing Secrets: Think of a secret that you have never told anyone else and write about how it feels to have that secret. Then, reflect upon a time you revealed a secret someone. Think about how it felt to finally reveal your secret. Relate this to what it means to come out of the closet.
2. Thinking Retrospectively: Create a retrospective about your life. You can look for drawings, stories, school assignments and projects that you have done in the past. Compile your past work into your own retrospective. Then, reflect about what your own retrospective says about you and your own history.
3. Key Concepts Discussion and Further Research: Choose a key concept in this issue and read the pieces that correspond with the concept. Then, research the concept and create a presentation about the topic, which you will then share with the class.
4. Contributor Biographies and Themes: Choose one of the notable contributors in this issue to research. Find and read work by the contributor and then reflect, write, or present about who the writer is, what sort of things they wrote, and why their writing is important and relevant today.

History of Sinister Wisdom:

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal founded by Catherine Nicholson and Harriett Desmoines in 1976. Since then, *Sinister Wisdom* publishes three to four times a year and documents lesbian experience through poems, prose, politics, theory, and art.

Notable Contributors:

Achy Obejas
Adrienne Rich
Ann Allen Shockley
Audre Lorde
Barbara Deming
Barbara Grier
Carolyn Gage
Cherrie Moraga
Donna Allegra
Elana Dykewomon

Gloria Anzaldúa
Joan Nestle
Julia Penelope
Marilyn Frye
Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz
Michelle Cliff
Minnie Bruce Pratt
Paula Gunn Allen
Sarah Lucia Hoagland
SDiane Bogus

Sinister Wisdom is happy to provide, free of charge, classroom sets and reading group sets of journal issues. For people who are able to make a contribution to cover the cost of postage, we will provide an invoice; postage reimbursement is voluntary though greatly appreciated.

Sinister Wisdom 43/44 Teaching Guide Created by Zane DeZeeuw June 2017
and Edited by LB Johnston July 2017