

Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

Sinister Wisdom 49 Teaching Guide

Sinister Wisdom Teaching Guides ***Sinister Wisdom 49: The Lesbian Body***

Summary: *Sinister Wisdom 49: The Lesbian Body* features writings and art by contributors who explore the meanings, expressions, identities, and challenges of the lesbian body. The voices featured in this work demand broad and varied definitions of *lesbian*, *lesbianism*, and *lesbian body*. Each contribution represents a patch in a quilt of intersectional lesbian identities. The three editors' notes to this issue pose the problem that lesbian identity has been portrayed as too white, too femme, too able-bodied, too middle-upper class, too desexualized, and under threat of being overwritten by broader definitions of queer and gay. This issue of *Sinister Wisdom* examines this problem by offering new perspectives on the lesbian body as it pertains to expression, desire, race, class, coming of age, aging, disability, abuse, motherhood, illness, and image.

Themes:

The key question this issue does not answer is, *What is the lesbian body?*, because there is no single, definite answer. Instead, the issue proposes many ways that lesbian bodies can be expressed, that no singular lesbian form or expression of sexuality exists, and that the problems challenging the lesbian body are broad and diverse. The parameters of the lesbian body that the writers in this issue offer form a varied matrix of lesbian identity.

Below is a list of themes for discussion with some suggested excerpts:

- The Body and Ownership:
 - “When Docile Bodies Dance” by Peg O’Connor p. 26-32.
 - “Self-Body-Portrait” by Laura Hershey p. 39.
 - “Double Target” by Lisa Edmonds p. 44-45.
 - “Constrict/Construct” by Julie Finn p. 46.
 - “The Bus” by Arl Spencer Nadel p. 60-61.
 - “from Meaning and Myth in Menopause” by Angela Koenig p. 78-82.
 - “dying to” by jill falzoi p. 83-88.
 - “What We Do With Our Bodies Series, #12” by Cathy Cade p. 104.
- Sexuality/Definitions of Lesbian Sex:
 - “When Docile Bodies Dance” by Peg O’Connor p. 26-32.
 - “You Know I Used to Work in the Sex Industry” by Janet Mason p. 36-37.
 - “Sliding Into Home: Identifying Lesbian” by Judith P. Stelboum p. 47-53.
 - “Fingers in Popcorn” by Cherie Bowers p. 54.
 - “Wild Women” by Connie Meredith p. 89.
 - “Queen of the Girls” by Julia (Dolphin) Trahan p. 90-94.
 - “My Violin Loves to Play” by Sonja Franeta p. 105-109.
 - “Moonriders” by K. Linda Kivi p. 110-113.
 - “Canyon” by Laura Hershey p. 114.
- Assault and Healing:
 - “Areas of Injury I, II & III” by Elizabeth D. Ross p. 25.

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- “My Violin Loves to Play” by Sonja Franeta p. 105-109.
- Separatism/Definitions of Lesbianism Versus Gender Expression:
 - “Notes for a Magazine: Our Bodies Are the Flags” by Elana Dykewomon p. 4-9.
 - “Notes for a Magazine: Internalizing the Lesbian of Color Body” by Jamie Lee Evans p. 10-13.
 - “Silent Pride” by Kadeth Pozzesi p. 18-20.
 - “When Docile Bodies Dance” by Peg O’Connor p. 26-32.
 - “A Woman Playing Ball” by Sheila J. Packa p. 34-35.
 - “Sliding Into Home: Identifying Lesbian” by Judith P. Stelboun p. 47-53.
- Disability:
 - “Queen of the Girls” by Julia (Dolphin) Trahan p. 90-94.
- Illness:
 - “Basics” by Naja Sorella p. 40-43.
 - “Chronic Blues” by Kelly Jean Cogswell p. 73.
 - “I Don’t Touch My Breasts Anymore” by Chaia Zblocki Heller p. 74.
 - “Left Us Talking” by Dion Farquhar p. 75-76.
 - “Black earth, white, the sky” by Cheryl J. Moore p. 98-103.
- Visual Art and Literary Art:
 - (genre comparison)
- “Beauty,” and Expression:
 - “Silent Pride” by Kadeth Pozzesi p. 18-20.
 - “Double Target” by Lisa Edmonds p. 44-45.
 - “Constrict/Construct” by Julie Finn p. 46.
 - “Opening Dialogue” by Suzanne p. 55.
 - “I Like My Chi-i-sa-i Body Now” by Donna Tanigawa p. 56-59.
 - “The Bus” by Arl Spencer Nadel p. 60-61.
 - “6/29/92” by Arl Spencer Nadel p. 71-72.
 - “Skinny Sisters” by Elissa Raffa p. 62-70.
 - “Wild Woman” by Connie Meredith p. 89.
 - “The Writer in the Mirror” by Barbara Ruth p. 95-97.

Discussion Questions:

1. Dykewomon’s notes concern how lesbian-identified bodies are being usurped and erased by broader definitions of gay or queer, and she is especially concerned with how this is affected by fluid definitions of gender and transgender bodies. How can you see her questions and definitions as helpful for understanding lesbian separatism? How are they problematic? How can these questions relate to Burch’s and Evans’s notes on lesbians of color?
2. How do these essays expose the fact that general notions of lesbianism have been internalized as primarily white? How can these issues overlap into the problem of defining lesbian sex as Stelboun explores? What are the benefits and/or setbacks to having so many definitions?

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3. What are the political and cultural implications for the way media portrays lesbians? How do students see the ideas, possibilities, and problems raised in *Sinister Wisdom* as still applicable and how have society's representations changed since 1993?
4. How does the artwork relate to the theme of the lesbian body? How does the art expand on these definitions? What is the artwork's relationship to the rest of the journal? What major themes are expressed in the artwork?
5. What main themes are most prominent in this issue over the lesbian body? How do the pieces with different themes converge and how do they challenge each other? How do you see the themes relating to other concepts of lesbianism or larger concepts in the world?

Unit Teaching Activity Ideas:

- Matrix of Definitions: Read the three "Notes for a Journal" pieces by Dykewomon, Evans, and Burch (p. 4-14) and Stelboum's essay, "Sliding into Home: Identifying Lesbian Sex" (pp. 47-53). Create a matrix of definitions of the lesbian body and lesbian sex according to these readings. Discuss where definitions converge and where they disperse. Using these four works as a theoretical premise, find another piece in the issue that adds to these definitions. You can then share your findings with the class or in groups, explaining what the piece is doing and how the writing expands or challenges these definitions.
- Lesbians in Popular Culture: Consider lesbians in popular culture. Who are the big names, such as celebrities, athletes, or other prominent figures? In terms of race, class, ability, culture, etc., how do these figures compare to the lesbian bodies portrayed in the editors' notes?
- Artwork: Discuss the cover art of the issue with other students. What images are present, and how do these images converse with one another? What do you think the cover is saying? How does it relate to the lesbian body or the content in the issue? Pick another artwork in the issue and try to answer similar questions.
- Theme Analysis: In class, get into a group and choose a theme from this issue. Discuss readings that relate to each theme and then write down the ways that each writer or artist chose to express this theme.

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Key Words: *Lesbian separatism*

There is not a singular definition of lesbian separatism, as the parameters of the term are widely debated. For the purposes of the lesson, you may want to start by loosely describing it as a personal and political lesbian-feminist theory (and praxis!) that seeks to carve out/create social and economic spaces by and for lesbian-identifying women. By giving this as a baseline, your students can then use the readings to further define the term and its variables concerning its relationship to the more broadly defined gay or queer communities, communities of color, or definitions of disability, to name a few.

History of *Sinister Wisdom*: *Sinister Wisdom* is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal that began in 1976 and publishes three to four issues per year. The journal started in Charlotte, North Carolina with Harriett Desmoines (Ellenberger) and Catherine Nicholson as its editors. *Sinister Wisdom* is still published today, and its contents have evolved alongside lesbian identities, politics, theory, and aesthetics. Some issues, such as *Sinister Wisdom 49: The Lesbian Body*, are organized by a theme, while others are open issues that feature writing and art across themes.

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.

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