

# SINISTER WISDOM TEACHING GUIDE:

## *Sinister Wisdom 50: The Ethics Issue... Not!*

### SUMMARY

*Sinister Wisdom 50: The Ethics Issue...NOT!*

(Summer/Fall 1993) features submissions that pertain to the originally-proposed theme of lesbian ethics as well as works that do not directly address the question of ethics but represent broader themes in lesbian art and writing. In their opening notes for the magazine, guest editors Sauda Burch and Caryatis Cardea facetiously refer to “the ethics issue” as a failure. Due to lack of submissions responding to the call for submissions on lesbian ethics, the editors were compelled to create a hybrid issue that featured a range of broad and thematically-specific content. Sauda Burch notes, “...though we are disappointed that this is not the ethics issue, the work that specifically addresses ethics is inspiring and inventive, creating a solid foundation for further work” (5). Accordingly, many of the contributions to *Sinister Wisdom 50* entreat its readers to ask themselves, “what are lesbian ethics?” by providing insight into the personal and political privileges, oppressions, challenges, and oversights facing the lesbian community.

sinister wisdom 50

the ethics issue . . .



... NOT!

### 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 50: The Ethics Issue... Not!*, are organized by a theme, while others are open issues that feature writing and art across themes.



## THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

### **Ethics:**

- Melissa Farley “Ten Lies About Sadomasochism” p. 29-37
- Anonymous “In Our Hands: a memory of assisted dying” p. 41-44
- Elliot “Lesbian Legal Theory: a review of Ruthann Robson’s Lesbian Outlaw” p. 66-72
- Naja Sorella “Paying Up” p. 76-80
- Monifa Ajanaku “Dissilusioned, Dismayed – Ready for Revolution: Without Ethics Community Cannot Exist” p. 89-95

### **Family:**

- Sally Bellerose “Dancing Sisters” p. 13-17
- tova “community circles” p. 18-27
- Jamie Lee Evans “I’m No Poet” p. 86-88
- Emily Ballou “Corn Moon Sister” p. 108
- Jen Benka “Tracing” p. 105-107

### **(Hetero)patriarchy:**

- Melissa Farley “Ten Lies About Sadomasochism” p. 29-37
- Neta C. Crawford “Thoughts of the Wise Men” p. 60-61
- Pamela Gray “3 out of 4 (or more)...” p. 62-65

### **Illness and Disability:**

- Sally Bellerose “Dancing Sisters” p. 13-17
- Anonymous “In Our Hands: a memory of assisted dying” p. 41-44
- Naja Sorella “Paying Up!” p. 76-80
- K. Ellen Kerr “Mirror, Mirror” p. 81-85
- Aspen “Muscle Fetish” p. 96-97
- Caryatis Cardea “Notes on Scents” p. 128



## **THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS**

### **Race:**

- Neta C. Crawford “Thoughts of the Wise Men” p. 60-61
- Monifa Ajanaku “Disillusioned, Dismayed – Ready for Revolution” p. 89-95

### **Class:**

- tova “community circles” p. 18-27
- Naja Sorella “Paying Up!” p. 76-80
- Monifa Ajanaku “Disillusioned, Dismayed – Ready for Revolution” p. 89-95
- Zoe Rhine “Beyond the Sway” p. 101-104

### **Immigration:**

- tova “community circles” p. 18-27
- Jen Benka “Tracing” p. 105-107

### **Sex/Sexuality:**

- Sinson “Tell” p. 28
- Melissa Farley “Ten Lies About Sadomasochism” p. 29-37
- Zoe Rhine “Beyond the Sway” p. 101-104

### **Assault:**

- Pamela Gray “3 out of 4 (or more)...” p. 62-65
- Melissa Farley “Ten Lies About Sadomasochism” p. 29-37

### **Gender Expression:**

- Julie Blackwomon “Late Anger in a Cathedral” p. 73-75
- Elana Dykewomon “The Words for It” p. 46-55

### **Law:**

- Elliott “Lesbian Legal Theory...” p. 66-72



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

In her “Notes for a Magazine,” Sauda Burch remarks, “I think many lesbians were waiting for the Ethics Issue to write itself, or for it to be written by ‘those other lesbians,’ the philosophers and academics among us” (5). What does she mean by this? Who are “those other lesbians”? Why do you think the question of lesbian ethics is difficult to define, explore, or understand? Why do you think potential contributors hesitated to submit?

2

In Caryatis Cardea’s “Notes for a Magazine,” she defines lesbian ethics as the belief and practice that “despite all messages to the contrary, lesbians matter” (9). She also states that “Every politically conscious lesbian must make certain that her presence is not one of the things that reduces the sense of belonging, the right to belong, of other lesbians with less privilege than hers” (9). What does Cardea mean by this? Using other pieces from *Sinister Wisdom 50*, find and cite examples of lesbians adhering to this type of ethics. Conversely, which pieces demonstrate lesbians failing to adhere to these ethics?

3

Several works in this issue link assault with (hetero)patriarchy. What is the relationship between the two in Farley’s essay, “Ten Lies about Sadomasochism” (29-37)? What about Gray’s poem, “3 out of 4 (or more)...” (62-65)? Farley’s essay mentions some (perhaps) controversial points about sadomasochism; what are some of the strongest parts of her argument and what points could receive pushback? How do these points fall into the larger conversation of ethics?

4

A lot of the works in this issue directly and indirectly address issues/themes of home and place. What relationships, challenges, or triumphs do you see in regard to the concept of home and lesbianism? What do you think tova means in her poem when the speaker says “i left a home / so i could remember / how to love it” (27)? What other pieces in *Sinister Wisdom 50* engage with the idea of home, space, or transition?

5

Look at the last pages of *Sinister Wisdom 50*, and examine the announcements, advertisements, and final notes. Can these advertisements and notes speak to the theme of lesbian ethics? How so? What kind of community or political work do these sections serve?

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

### ETHICS DEFINITION

Create your own definition of ethics or lesbian ethics. How does your list align with one or more of the texts featured in this issue? How does it differ?

### COMMUNITY ETHICS

Think of a particular community that you belong to. What kinds of ethical issues does your community encounter? Write a statement of what you think your community's ethics are or ought to be. Use Caryatis Cardea's "Notes for a Magazine" or Ajanaku's "Disillusioned, Dismayed – Ready for Revolution: Without Ethics, Community Cannot Exist" as a model.

### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Write a "Letter to the Editor" about a text in the issue that moved you the most. What important messages or themes did the writing convey to you? What did you notice about the piece's style or form? Include a favorite/most important quote from the piece. How can you see this work connect with larger questions regarding historical or cultural context?





## FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about *Sinister Wisdom*, go to: [sinisterwisdom.org](http://sinisterwisdom.org)

To see other *Sinister Wisdom* Teaching Guides, go to: [sinisterwisdom.org/teachingguides](http://sinisterwisdom.org/teachingguides)

To request a free classroom set of *Sinister Wisdom 50*, email Julie at [sinisterwisdom@gmail.com](mailto:sinisterwisdom@gmail.com) with the class title, number of students, and mailing address.



*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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