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A Journal for the Lesbian Imagination in the Arts and Politics

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We are very excited to bring you the 15th Anniversary Sinister Wisdom Retrospective — a distillation of our part in the lesbian and women's movements in the United States over the last fifteen years. This issue is a monument to our work: solid, strong, fixed in place. This issue is a marker of our movement: small and bright, bobbing in a difficult channel, sometimes obscured by waves and weather, showing direction.

We hope this Retrospective will serve both lesbians who have been active in our movements for the last twenty years and new generations just getting started. What I believe we've created is a picture of the engagement of lesbian minds over these critical years. There is a wholeness to it — a quality of the fullness of our lives that can't be understood as simple progression from 1976 to 1991. Here is the spiral, the circle, the internal organs, the spirit of invention,

thought; reflection on and call to action.

It hasn't been easy to get this to you. Think of all the womyn involved over time; the unlikely possibility that Sinister Wisdom would survive seven editors, six changes of address, all these republican years. Remember the thousands of meetings, misunderstandings, painful differences of opinion, bursts of energy and idealism, personality clashes, gossip, betrayals imagined and real, new alliances, fragile hope, painful criticism, marches, demonstrations, evolving world views, everything that life brings and takes away influencing our analysis — all that is condensed in these pages.

Sinister Wisdom has often provided a mirror for lesbians — the first publication of poems and chapters that became books. If we had access to the last published version of a piece, we generally used that version. We have credited later publication and noted when we used updated versions, and we appreciate the support we've gotten from lesbian publishers — their generous permissions to reprint, and their help in finding authors. The work appears more or less in order — we moved some pieces to explore the development of themes. There's a special chronological section of excerpts from all the editor's notes which appears towards the end.

Many lesbians poured their energy into this collection. When Gloria Anzaldúa suggested we do this, I had no idea how difficult it would be. The Retrospective exists due to the prodigious critical energy of the current editorial group (whose names are listed on the

inside front cover) and an enormous amount of scut work (scanning, typing, xeroxing, phoning, assembling) for which Val Stoehr, Cath Thompson, Susan Goldberg, Nicole Appleberry, Sauda Burch, Jasmine Marah, Susanjill Kahn and Susan Levinkind deserve additional mention. Caryatis Cardea was a life-saver in the last six weeks, working tirelessly and thoughtfully on editing, assembling and details. I am privileged to work with so many dedicated, diverse dykes.

We gave ourselves 288 pages, went to 350, had to stop at 368. Wherever it made sense, we excerpted or edited the originals (with author permission — those pieces are preceded by "from"). And we still had to cut over a hundred pages of things we really wanted to include. We cut primarily the more recent, in-print work. Some of our concerns and events got bypassed — and we found glaring omissions of issues and lesbian voices we had hoped to include. Another group might have made a very different retrospective. I started to dream about page counts and the politics of choice. The fact is, this edition represents this editorial group's current values and world-view, as

applied to the material all the editors have bequeathed us.

We think we've done an incredible job and hope this Retrospective gives you as much as it's given us. We tried, as much as possible, to bring you source material that's out of print or difficult to get; to represent the intellectual and creative herstory of Sinister Wisdom; to leave you with a sense of the issues we wrestled with between these covers; to present as wide a range of writers and artists by race, class, age, ability and ethnicity as SW has included; and to honor our achievements. These are the lives of womyn who have cast their lot with womyn. We have not simply endured — we have shown each other the face of our creative resilience. We have every reason to be proud, and we have all the possibilities of going on from here.

Elana Dykewomon Oakland, 1991

Notes on Language

In the beginning, there was woman. That is, womon/womoon/wimin/wymin/wimmin/womyn. Well, never mind: actually, she was a lesbian. But it took some time to salvage that word from history. I mean, herstory.

Lesbians have written of the need to throw off the shackles of sexist slavery, to find release from paralyzing guilt, to convince the world that we are angry, not crazy, to move beyond the darkness of patriarchal oppression into the light of feminist freedom. What is wrong with this picture? Inaccurate metaphors that trivialize other struggles, associations of mental and physical disabilities with moral qualities, a dichotomy in which black is evil and white is good.

Feminist analysis of language took us from mankind to humanity, from chairman to chairwoman to chairperson to chair. The study of word origins cut from our vocabulary such words as gypped (to cheat, as a Gypsy would), sleazy (inferior, as products from an area of Poland), and denigrate (to vilify, literally, to blacken). We are learning to challenge pioneering (innovative and brave); pioneers in the building of these united states engineered genocide. Spanish, Yiddish, Italian, English as used in other countries, as well as regional, class, and racial/ethnic American dialects are all finding their place within the pages of lesbian literature.

We have known for some time that every theft is not a rape, every old womon is not a grandmother. We are still learning that every beginning is not a baptism, willful ignorance is not blindness. Yet, the most persistent forms of language abuse against which we struggle in Dyke culture still come in the form of dark/light distinctions, and a reliance on phrases which use bodily traits to connote intelligence, perceptiveness, moral integrity. Think, for a moment, about such terms

as blackmail, white lie, fat cat, a lame idea.

To the work we receive today, we try to apply all of this expanding body of knowledge. For this issue, we have edited only for space. We have not superimposed on our past the values we hold today. We are

reprinting, not rewriting, some of our history as Lesbians.

This work is not a matter of political correctness, itself a borrowed term denoting mind-control, but of political honor. It is a commitment to acknowledge the power of language and the privilege of being published. It is the recognition of multiple struggles, and the accordance of mutual respect among a cultural diversity of lesbians.

And the work continues. How about deaf to reason, every day is like Christmas, trimming the fat from the budget, poor in spirit,

standing up for our rights...?

Caryatis Cardea Oakland, 1991

23 December 1990

For the past several years I've been putting as much distance as possible between myself and Sinister Wisdom and the milieu it helped create. When you bet your life on a project and it succeeds beyond anything you might have reasonably or unreasonably expected, it's hard to let go, hard to know what to create next. Or how. For me, it was necessary to change language, country, and culture in order to separate finally, collapse, and start all over again (a fair indicator of how much that magazine meant to me). Now, we'll see if this hard-

won distance gives me anything resembling perspective.

What I remember most about doing *Sinister Wisdom* with Catherine, and what I loved most, is that we were operating at the very edge of possibility (a phrase I stole from Catherine — she says all these wonderful things and then doesn't write them down). We began it in Charlotte, North Carolina (a more unlikely place you could not pick) in utter (and I do mean utter) isolation. Any movement friendships we'd had we'd lost for reasons that are too complicated to explain (you might say neither of us was easy to get along with). And we did not quite know what we were doing. Neither did anybody else. This kept us in a state of nervous excitability, but it gave us a freedom that none of the later editors have been blessed with. By the time we handed over SW to Adrienne and Michelle, it had a willfulness, a momentum, and a troubled history all its own (imagine a very bratty five-year-old).

I can't believe it was only five years we did that journal. It felt like thirty-five years' worth of world-level events speeding by. We did on-and-off outside jobs for cash, but basically we ate up our (mostly her) resources and lived, breathed, and dreamed *Sinister Wisdom* twenty-

four hours a day, seven days a week.

It was a fantastic way to live.

There were many who poured their energy and their heart into SW during those years (Leigh Star perhaps most of all) but for me Catherine was always the center, the one who made it go, the one who risked the most, the one who paid the highest price. I remember her sending me to my room to write "Notes for a Magazine" for issue 1, and when I came out (approximately three days later), terrified

speechless of what I had written, she read them, blanched, and said, "Perfect. They'll go in just like that." She was kissing her past life good-bye and she knew it.

Which brings me to the subject of love, since courage requires it. It was an act of love, *Sinister Wisdom*. That's the only way I can describe its root, its origin, its essential character. It grew out of those endless dusk-to-dawn conversations between us, which were a form of lovemaking themselves, and which were motivated by a mutual love for the world, to put it bluntly. The world, the earth, her people, her creatures, everything that walks, swims, crawls, slithers, flies, breathes, squeaks, shouts, sings, speaks.

That is why the logo is what it is. That is why the title is what it is.

And that, I am convinced, is where power is.

For me, *Sinister Wisdom* was never really about lesbian community. It was never really about art or politics either (since, for starters, the distinction between the two is not clear to me). It was about transformation, nothing less. It was about releasing the power of passionate love between women through language and image, words and pictures, with the intent of saving the earth and her creatures, including ourselves, from destruction.

In many ways, that sounds like even more of a long shot now than it did fifteen years ago.

But what have we got to lose?



Jerusha (#13, 1980)

What Is A Lesbian?

Catherine and Harriet ran a "What Is A Lesbian?" column in issues #3 and #4. We started with quotes that appeared in those early issues and added a few ...

* * *

[W]e've been thinking about the meaning and power of the word "Lesbian"...what happens to a woman when she identifies herself or her work by that word, what happens when she doesn't, what we mean by the word, what is meant by the word when it is used against us.

Catherine and Harriet #3

I am a lesbian because I love women — and because I love myself as a woman....The woman who chooses herself, who chooses other women, is denying the necessity to choose opposites, is, in fact, denying the necessity of opposites....When I became a lesbian, all the many parts of myself came together....The choice of lesbianism (and the opening to womanvision) is a wholistic, integrated choice: the blending of a politics, poetics, sexuality, spirituality, philosophy, psychology, etc. that transcends opposites, heals schisms, and affirms a multi–dimensional reality. To move in the direction of this multi–dimensionality is to choose revolution in the deepest, most transforming sense of the word — (for me) lesbian-feminist–anarchist revolution.

Peggy Kornegger 44**

First, lesbianism, even technically sexually, is not 'homosexual' it is gynosexual. And second, being a womon-identified-womon, a lesbian, is: opposing the male sex and everything it represents, realistically, and opposing the masculinization of the female sex.... I prefer 'male sex' to 'patriarchy' because it prevents confusion. The malist regimes, malized societies, are not just rule by father, but rule by son, brother, anything and everything male. If we understand that our enemy is the male sex, a very real parasite living off our reproduction of ourselves, we keep ourselves ideologically realistic, which is the only soil in which any real strategy will grow.... My primary fear, is that the female sex is afraid to admit that the male sex is its enemy, and that we will lie in absolutely any way we have to, to prevent understanding this.... It is why womon don't want to hear theory about the male sex, and ... will accept rhetoric about the female sex as criticism and reject criticism of the male sex as rhetoric.... Lesbianism is womon trusting womon for our very physical survival. Not pretending to trust one another. Mia Albright #3

But lesbians know that the Nos and the Yeses are indivisible. A revolution with the vision to see its true direction calls for more than refusal. It calls for blood-knowledge of the possible. In her erotic life, the lesbian imprints the possible on the tissue of her being. The deep exploration and celebration of self and other. The reclaiming and the cultivation of the soil of her psychic and physical territory. The dissolving of man-made divisions between flesh and spirituality, giving and receiving, work and play, creation and recreation. The free sharing of wealth. That is what my lover and I do at the kitchen table, and that is what we do in bed.

Cynthia Rich "Reflections on Eroticism" #15

We are living proof that women can not only survive without men, but we survive happily. And we live in relative peace and harmony with one another, for no matter what differences may exist between any group of Lesbians, we are never threatened when we have to deal with one another on a truly human level. And we enjoy being together.

This means that if there's ever to be a true revolution for the liberation of women, Gay women will have to make it. The question is, will we succeed when most men and women are against us? Better yet, will it be worth the effort?

I wish I knew.

Anita Cornwell "To a Bamboozled Sister" #3

Lesbianism crosses all major forms of family, marital residence, mean size of local communities, marital exchange, social stratification, and post-partum sex taboos. I conclude from this data that lesbianism is geographically, socially and economically widespread across human society.

Susan Cavin, "Lesbian Origins Sex Ratio Theory" #9

And it tells me something about the essence of what we are as feminists — and especially as lesbians — that it is seen by those who would destroy us as a threat, poison, and in that threat is our defense. ... For by being what we are, by speaking aloud, we come immediately into confrontation with the world around us. Certain things — if imagined and then spoken — deny us access to approved roles within our social sphere. As a self-spoken lesbian, I will never again be the same "good girl" I was when the approval of the fathers was possible for me, whether in my personal life or my professional and political lives.

I udith McDaniel "The Transformation of Silence …" #6

if lesbian culture includes all possibilities among women, lesbian comes to mean very much the same thing as feminist — which is what

lesbian feminists have often claimed, to the dismay of homophobes. as dolores noll pointed out some years ago, many dykes feel a clear need for a name that means 'women who sleep with women' — how else do you know who won't put you down for wanting her?

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz "Culture Making..." #13

I suppose it's important to believe that "lesbian" is someone in revolt against patriarchy. But certainly my revolt ain't necessarily every lesbian's revolt. And certainly, frankly, I find many lesbians' revolts revolting. I have attained the privilege of doing so by living almost entirely outside the "real" world and making up one as I go along. I therefore live in a complete world of smart dykes, dumb dykes, literate dykes, illiterate dykes, etc. The "real" world is populated by straight people/men/women. A "lesbian" to me does not look and seem better than those others because I seldom recognize those others except through a dim haze and only clearly when they're trying to take something away from me and/or being particularly offensive. ...Lesbians are sharks, vampires, creatures from the deep lagoon, godzillas, hydrogen bombs, inventions of the laboratory, werewolves—all of whom stalk Beverly Hills by night.

Bertha Harris #3

... [A] Lesbian is a Lesbian. In my mind it means a superior being ... almost a goal to be achieved ... I knew [as a child] (instinctively?) that I could do anything I wanted to do and be anything I wanted to be and that the reason that this was so was that I was a Lesbian. I also felt... that it meant a tremendous weight of responsibility upon me in my behavior, that I needed to be in every way superior to my surroundings ... In a sense, then, yes, Lesbians must be humanists. If we accept that there is a world responsibility, then certainly Lesbians are responsible for the world. We are best fitted to be, so we almost would have to be. I believe that if the world (the human race) is to survive, then Lesbians will lead the way.... I believe that women would automatically be Lesbians given social choice to be. It is, after all, so preferable a way to be, to live, that I cannot imagine anyone thinking for a moment of any other choice given the facts.... If we go on insisting that we have to be defined by patriarchy and by men in general then we may not ever succeed.... We have to live with women ... in every sense. Our goals are with women. I do not know why men will fade out in such a world, but I know that they will. Why assume that Lesbians are cast out? Cast out of whose world? Not out of mine, my dear: the only world I live in is filled with Lesbians. My world is the real world.

Barbara Grier #3

from A Cursory and Precursory History of Language, and the Telling of It

The "feminist solution" had come easily, as things do, when everyone had relaxed and stopped stumbling over themselves. As usual, the solution was the easiest and the most obvious, and had been within reach forever, but no one had seen it. We had been looking off into the distance for so long that the obvious was easy to miss, being obvious. And the analysis of the feminist situation came even easier.

Energy. That simple. Women had energy. Men...had learned to draw the huge quantities of energy they required from the earth, water, fire, sun, and atom. Most importantly, they had learned how to draw energy from women....

Consequently, there was a "batfle to be fought." Women smiled, encouraged, and sometimes wept, and went on being women, although they began to wear themselves out trying to fulfill the needs of men....

What sparked those first feminists was the fact that men had begun to take themselves seriously...They thought they were NEC-ESSARY! They began to believe that they were self-perpetuating, and it finally reached a point where they had plundered and pillaged, ravaged and raped, not only the women, but the earth, and each other....

The feminists went on having meetings where everyone disagreed about everything imaginable, talking and arguing with other women, putting out a lot of energy and getting a lot of energy from other women, which they called "consciousness-raising," learning to love themselves and each other, and learning to do all the things they had believed they couldn't do. Nothing seemed to make sense, and then all of it made sense, and they continued to become what they were becoming.... They had ceased to oppose the ordering of the men, had realized that opposing, the act of opposing, drains energy, creating its opposite, lack of energy. They had learned that opposing a thing merely feeds it and strengthens it, giving it a reason to continue itself. Instead, they withdrew into their centers, forcing the men to oppose them, to drain themselves in the idle activity of battle

This piece of writing was reprinted in its entirety in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, eds. Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Julia Penelope (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), 55-62, and is excerpted here with permission of the author and publisher. It was originally published in *SW* under the name Julia Stanley.

against, while the women began to live for. The women, growing toward wholeness, began to understand that opposition is itself: opposition. The men, in their appropriation of the world, had defined identity as opposition. The women, in becoming themselves, began to create identities out of themselves, on a new ground....

As we grew in knowing ourselves, we put aside the language we had once cherished for its ambiguities, although we had called those ambiguities "subtle nuances." We had once been proud to speak a language in which we had no means of speaking our meanings clearly, even to ourselves. First, we had to discover our meanings, and out of that discovery grew a language that expressed them clearly. As strength dissolved our need for fear we began to explore our silences, which came to satisfy us as rest and the fulfillment of meaning. We learned to speak only when there is meaning in our words. That was the hardest thing we had to learn, so many of us did not know we had meanings.

The language that evolved out of our learning together was a language of acting in the world, rather than "events"; it was a speaking of our living, not our "lives"; of our doing, not our "deeds"; of our touching, eating, tracing, dancing, or moving, not "motion," of dying, not "death." The nouns of men became our verbs, what had been "objects" becamedoers. The abstraction, the labeling, the classification, the imposing of a fixed, external order was no longer needed. "Love," "death," "honor," "dignity," and "trust" were expressed in our living together; we did not need to speak of such things as though they were unreal, fragile. Through the verb we entered into the world and began to understand the other beings in the world as they lived.

There is a story we still tell for the joy of the telling, of a group of women who once gathered together, and some of the women called for words from the other women, and out of these words they wove a chant, and the chant became a singing together. And one woman yelled out the word *anarchism*, which was then woven into the fabric of the chanting,

and in the chanting that word became orgasm, going on.

Accept this telling of me as it is of you. We belong to ourselves. Feel the power that is yours swell and lift within you. It is yours. It is you. It is all of us. Womanlove self—creating womanpower within us. Take your power into your hands and lift them up, your power living in you. Let us join our hands together in strength and in love, the radiant power of women. Let us speak the language of our living.

Meet

Woman when we met on the solstice high over halfway between your world and mine rimmed with full moon and no more excuses your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you tasting your ruff down to sweetness and I forgot to tell you I have heard you calling across this land in my blood before meeting and I greet you again on the beaches in mines lying on platforms in trees full of tail-tail birds flicking and deep in your caves of decomposed granite even over my own laterite hills after a long journey licking your sons while you wrinkle your nose at the stench.

Coming to rest in open mirrors of your demanded body I will be black light as you lie against me I will be heavy as August over your hair our rivers flow from the same sea and I promise to leave you again full of amazement and our illuminations dealt through the short tongues of color or the taste of each other's skin when it hung from our childhood mouths.

When we meet again
will you put your hands upon me
will I ride you over our lands
will we sleep beneath trees in the rain?
You shall get young as I lick your stomach
hot and at rest before we move off again

you will be white fury in my navel
I will be sweeping night
Mawulisa foretells our bodies
as our hands touch and learn
from each others hurt.
Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou
in Tema's bright port while the priestess of Larteh
protects us
in the high meat stalls of Palmyra and Abomey-Calavi
now you are my child and my mother
we have always been sisters in pain.

Come in the curve of the lion's bulging stomach lie for a season out of the judging rain we have mated we have cubbed we have high time for work and another meeting women exchanging blood in the innermost rooms of moment we must taste of each other's fruit at least once before we shall both be slain.

[&]quot;Meet" was reprinted in Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* (1978, W.W. Norton, NY). This is the version that appears in *The Black Unicorn*.

Lesbians & Literature

Two sections from a seminar at the Modern Language Association, San Francisco, December, 1975. Panelists included June Arnold, Sandy Boucher, Susan Griffin, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Judith McDaniel.

Susan Griffin:

I want to talk about silences and how they affect a writer's life. Of course many of us have read Tillie Olsen's book on silences in which she talks about the effects of material conditions on writers' lives and especially on women's lives, but I want to talk today about psychic silences — silences that occur because of psychic conditions and particularly that silence which affects us as lesbians.

I feel in fact that the whole concept of the muse, or of inspiration, is one that is kind of a cop-out concept. There is something very fascinating going on in the writer's psyche when there is silence, an inability to write, and it can't very well be explained by "well, today

I was inspired," or "it's flowing now."

But in fact, each silence and each eruption into speech constitutes a kind of event and a kind of struggle in the life of the writer. To me the largest struggles in my life around silence had to do with the fact that I am a woman and a lesbian.

When I first recognized my anger as a woman, my feelings as a feminist, suddenly my writing was transformed. Suddenly I had material, I had subject matter, I had something to write about. And then a few years after that I found another great silence in my life. I found myself unhappy with my writing, unhappy with the way I expressed myself, unable to speak. I wrote in a poem—"words do not come to my mouth anymore." I happened also in my personal life to be censoring the fact that I was lesbian and I thought I was doing that because of the issue of child custody. That was is a serious issue in my life, but I wasn't acknowledging how important it was to me both as a writer and a human being, to be open and to write about my feelings as a lesbian. In fact, I think that writers are always dealing with one sort of taboo or another. If these taboos are not general to society, you may experience in your private life a fear of perceiving some truth because of its implications and this fear can stop you from writing. I think this is why poetry and dreams have so much in common because the source of both poetry and dreams is the kind of perception similar to that of the child who thought the emperor had no clothes. The dangerous perception. Dangerous to the current order of things.

But when we come to the taboo of lesbianism, I think that this is one that is most loaded for everyone, even for those who are not lesbians. Because the fact of love between women, the fact that two women are able to be tender, to be sexual with each other—is one that affects every event in this society — psychic and political and sociological.

For a writer the most savage censor is oneself. If in the first place, you have not admitted to yourself that you are a lesbian, or to put it in simpler language—that you love women or are capable of wanting to kiss a woman or hold her—this one fact, this little perception, is capable of radiating out and silencing a million other perceptions. It's

capable, in fact, of distorting what you see as truth at all.

To give you one example, there have been numbers and numbers of psychoanalytic papers, poems and articles written on the Oedipal relationship. Everyone seems to recognize that the son can love the mother and that then there is the conflict with the father. This is supposed to be a big taboo and yet everyone can talk about it easily. And yet, who of us really, even lesbians, can talk about the love of the daughter for the mother? Yet all human beings learn love from their mother whether they are male or female. Everyone who's ever been a mother knows that for a fact, a child learns to smile from the mother, learns to enjoy being held. The first love-affair, male or female, is with the mother.

I feel that the mother/daughter relationship is one that is central to all women's lives, whether they have made the decision to be heterosexual or homosexual. In fact, when you come to a relationship about the mother and the daughter, you come to a relationship inevitably about the daughter and her own self. If she cannot accept the love she's felt for her mother, if she cannot accept that identification, she cannot accept also the love that she's felt for herself. We get back here to what I think is the central problem with women's writing: that is self-hatred, hatred of the body, hatred of one's own voice, hatred of one's own perceptions. In fact, the female voice is characterized as ugly in this society — especially our mothers' voices. Our mothers' voices are characterized on tv as loud, as harassing, as bitchy, as fish-wifey. Many women, whatever our sexual identification, try to move away from the mother rather than to go back and look at this important relationship. This is only one way in which, as a writer, censoring your feelings of love for women can affect your perceptions.

In fact, I want to tell you the story of a poem that I wrote. I wrote the first line of it a year before the rest of the poem was written. This was a case in which the muse came back a year later, and a real process occurred while she was gone. The poem is called "The Song of A Woman with Her Parts Coming Out." The title occurred to me and the

first few lines, but I just simply could not go any further and it was a mystery to me why. It was during a period in which I was in a relationship with a woman whom I loved, but I was not writing about anything in that relationship because I was worried about child custody and because she also was not really willing to call herself a lesbian. I couldn't use the word to myself and words are magic. In King Lear just the simple "nothing" changed everyone's life in that play. Words have a tremendous power and I believe that it is extremely important to use that word, to be able to say: I am a lesbian.

The rest of the poem did come out when I re-examined this in myself and decided that indeed I had to use that word. I had to be open about my sexuality in my writing. And I'll end by reading that poem, "The Song of A Woman with Her Parts Coming Out," (published in

The Lesbian Reader, Amazon Press, 1975).

Note: this was an extemporaneous speech delivered from notes.

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June Arnold:

Daughters, Inc. is a Vermont-based publishing company specializing in novels by women, founded by Parke Bowman and me in 1972. Our first list came out in October 1973 and since then we have published eleven novels and one anthology. We began with our own money, the two of us in an old Vermont farmhouse. We specialized in novels partly because the other women's presses were publishing poetry, short stories and nonfiction, and partly because we believed in the novel as a woman's art form — that it could be an extension of and intensification of consciousness-raising, a place where reader and author could communicate on an intimate personal level, where the reader could see her own or her sister's experience portrayed and receive it in a different way than through the mind. Because we think people do things not because they know what is right or wrong but because they feel deeply about their own oppression.

I want to talk about what I think is existing right now as a lesbian-feminist or feminist-lesbian novel. I've gotten this idea from reading manuscripts submitted to us, novels we've published, and other women's press publications. It's not prescriptive; I just think that certain things have happened. And I think women everywhere in the women's movement are trying to express very much the same thing but I think the lesbian feminist will be the one to bring the develop-

ment to the most plump, rich, full ripeness.

There is a pre-women's movement novel, Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha*, which I think is a forerunner of what lesbian feminists are now doing. What she called 'exploring the infinite complexity of the

present' is very much what lesbian feminists are now trying to do, because we have no past. The dialogue between Melanctha and the doctor shows the impossibility of the doctor, who stands for reason and society, ever understanding the mind of a women with only a present. And the circularity of Melanctha's sentences and thoughts opens up, for those of us who follow, the problem which every lesbian feminist feels in her unconscious: how to phrase what has never been.

I think the novel — art, the presentation of women in purity (also I would include poetry, short stories) — will lead to, or is revolution. I'm not talking about an alternate culture at all, where we leave the politics to the men. Women's art is politics, the means to change women's minds. And the women's presses are not alternate either but are the mainstream and the thrust of the revolution. And there's no tenure in the revolution.

One of the things we have noticed in reading women's press writings is a change in language. We've gotten rid of harsh expressions like screw and spread your legs (women as property/objects), we've reclaimed fat and wrinkled as adjectives of beauty, we've experimented with unpatriarchal spelling and neuter pronouns. I think we've changed our sentence structure, and paragraphs no longer contain one subject since the inclusiveness of many complex things is striven for. We write to express feelings not appearances. I think changes in language are hard to pinpoint but it's clear to me that lesbian feminist writers are trying to shape a new tool for new uses, to reclaim our language for ourselves with a very strong sense that we have been divided from it.

The form this new novel is taking — it's developing away from plot-time via autobiography, confession, oral tradition into what might finally be a spiral. Experience weaving in upon itself, commenting on itself, inclusive, not ending in final victory/defeat but ending with the sense that the community continues. A spiral sliced to present a vision which reveals a whole and satisfies in some different way than the male resolution of conflict. I also think we lose a little bit of the old adrenalin-raising intensity by doing this, and what we'll have to figure out a way to do, both as readers and writers, is to express the intensity differently and learn to hear it differently, in different ways.

As far as character goes, there are usually many characters or at least several. There is no hero (which is a heritage from the Greeks who cared very little about women). There is an interinvolvement of women in a community. Now I think the lesbian will be the one most likely to be able to deal with women relating to women within a community, which doesn't mean that every lesbian can do that or that no feminist can; it means that their own experiences will force lesbian

writers to confront communities of women.

When we have talked about genius in the past like Gertrude Stein, we usually mean that one person rises up out of her time and coordinates or solidifies what's gone before and makes it palpable. I don't think we'll see lesbian feminist genius in the same way. I think it is arising right now and it is a collective genius, coming from one woman's poem, another's comment, a scene from a chapter of a novel. I think that as a writer; as a publisher from the material we get I see it; and I certainly feel that as a reader.

The artist, if she calls herself a lesbian feminist, is going to have to be responsible to the feminist community and involved in it. As an artist she must challenge all assumptions. The lesbian understands in the most intimate complex detail how assumptions attempt to limit and channel human possibility. In rejecting the culture's most fundamental patriarchal patterns, the lesbian starts with her head empty, or free of solutions, answers — a vital precondition for discovery.

This responsibility to and involvement in the community leads to

several new qualities in the art produced:

There is a breaking down of distance between the writer and the reader. An example of this is Elana Nachman in *Riverfinger Women* when Inez, speaking about the past, says "Those nights with your arms curved around your own thickness saying to yourself, I will be enough for myself. I will never need anyone. Never. I will be for myself, warm and all'—are those times gone? Those times are now, dammit." And you're brought right into the story.

There's a change in humor, a softening, search for a different way of telling a joke, getting away from having a butt of a joke (which was us most of the time). The humor deals with the absurdity of the patriarchy but also our own foibles, assumptions and presumptions which we discover during the learning of lesbian feminism. No one is born a lesbian feminist — we ourselves are in process and the

process will be revealed in the novel too.

I think we have a kind of unprecedented, complete honesty, however embarrassing. In Nancy Lee Hall's A True Story of A Drunken Mother, the beer that she had made and stored in the garage exploded. It was her security. In panic she screams to her daughter: "It's blowing up, stupid! Run in the house and get all the pans and pitchers you can find —hurry." The child returns with one pot. The mother screams "You brat! I said all you can." This is a very hard thing to write about and expose, and requires caring more about women than about your own image.

Because of this softening, opening honesty, I think the women's community is going to trust, if it doesn't now, the lesbian feminist writer — which means that if a hundred sociologists say that old women are timid, conservative teasippers and one lesbian feminist

writer says NO, old women are dangerous, furious, ready to swoop down on society because they have no life to lose, you the reader can believe it because the dyke author is committed only to the truth, having no stake in placating the culture — no life to lose either. The feminist presses, for the same reason, will be the ground in which this new art is brought to flower.

It is the responsibility and privilege, too, of feminist criticism and feminist studies teachers to participate in the development of our own voice and art — and also to watch out for and warn of tricksters who try to use the ingredients learned at panels like these, instead of her

own experience, to gain a new kind of fame as a feminist.

I think we know a lot about how lesbians are oppressed. I'd like to say that the lesbian feminist novelists, short story writers, poets, artists of all kinds and the feminist presses themselves are, I think, magnificently privileged to have the art of the future in their hands.

(The idea of breaking down distance is from an unpublished paper by Andrea Loewenstein. This talk first appeared in *Plexus*, February, 1976.)

& & &

Judith McDaniel (#4, 1977)

Raspberries

Others ripen slowly into darkness; You hide beneath a leaf and come in swift and fragrant redness.

from Retrieved From Silence:My Life and Times with Daughters, Inc.

December, 1977: ... Review copies of *Applesauce*, *I Must Not Rock*, and *Angel Dance* arrive in the mail. With an eerie sense that history is repeating itself, I promise I'll review one ... and I proceed to the business of completely falling apart in privacy while reading Daughters' latest.

Applesauce brings the past flooding back.

* * *

Checkpoint #1: November, 1973

Now nan body felt extraordinary, the sense of feeling focussed on nan palms as if one first experienced the metaphor literally . . . as if . . . aliveness existed independently and merely needed to be called up.

(June Arnold, *The Cook and the Carpenter*, p. 26) In three nights and three days (inbetween making money, cooking, ag for "heterosexyal acrobat of the year" and various other Popula

vying for "heterosexual acrobat of the year," and various other Renaissance Girl activities), I read Rubyfruit Jungle, Nerves, Early Losses, The Treasure, and The Cook and the Carpenter. I read them again.... I go through and pick out the juicy parts.... I end up falling in love with every single female character but one ... congratulate myself on having made no false guesses about the shared gender of lovers, despite the tricky pronoun na.

Then I review the only cryptic novel of the lot, The Treasure,...a

review which successfully avoids any hint of Lesbian activity.

Time passes... and I grow more melodramatic by the hour. I buy a typewriter, for salvation ... Finally, when the new year hits, I sit down to write myself out of a suicide.

* * *

Nine months and 213 journal pages later, I sit alone, in a room of my own that rides like a fugitive ship above the women's center....

We have a lot of paper. Here is the typewriter. Why don't you become a novelist? I urge you to become a novelist. (Bertha Harris, Lover, p. 91)

...I can only manage to sit at the typewriter if I imagine I'm composing a love present to women in the same struggle I am....

* * *

Checkpoint #2: January, 1975

...Daughters in High School, Riverfinger Women, and A True Story of a Drunken Mother have simultaneously burst into sound, forming

an insistent rhythm section in the back of my head. Riverfinger Women shuttles around the dyke contingent of the women's center, passed from hand to hand with squeals, shouts, moans of recognition. Buzzing, popping, crackling, singing, the center is a live wire, receiving information, tapping out information: these are our lives (beep), these are our lives. The journal that began as a delicate matter of personal survival becomes a communal record. Sometimes it feels foggy, sometimes it feels cruel, but once in a great while it feels like loving, holding a mirror to the wymyn around me, murmuring, you didn't know you were a miracle? look.... everyone is writing now, and the journals pass from hand to hand with squeals, shouts, moans of recognition. The women's center newsletter becomes a babble of gushing, furious voices — rhetoric and love poems to wymyn...

In the midst of the whirlwind, seven of us converge. We talk together, breathe together on the subjects of how to untangle patriarchal language, how to exorcise patriarchal values, how to cut away patriarchal attachments. We are Lesbians; together we become separatists, and we name ourselves, with much hilarity, "drastik dykes." Conspiring, we peel away layers of lies, layers of constructed selves, stripping down, down, down to touch the essential womyn surging

up, released, from below.

* * *

... After our public and private dramatics, we leave the women's center — in part, because the women's center has already left us. Its environment vanished, my journal is at an end....I wrestle with passage after long passage of introspective murk, maundering self-pities, dribbling mundaneities, here and there flashes of what seems now — in the utter collapse of my courage — to have been more delusion than dream. Nothing works. Nothing.

Checkpoint #3: November, 1975

Seven drastik dykes, having sucked the last juices each from her own past, each from our collective past, are reduced to tearing each other's most present, most vulnerable skins. Three of us head north on the strength (in my mind, at least) of one last-ditch fantasy: that some (any) speeding tough-talking, boot-stomping naugahyde New York City dyke will inform us what to do with ourselves next....finally, we land exhausted, bedraggled, and half-stunned at a party to celebrate the coming-out of Daughters' third group of books: *The Pumpkin Eater, Happenthing in Travel On, Born to Struggle*, and *Sister Gin*. Someone introduces us as the troops from North Carolina, and June Arnold

asks us if we know the woman who reviewed Daughters' books for *The Charlotte Observer*. With the unmistakably helpless feeling I'm being witched, I manage squeakily to reply, "I did." She laughs.

"You're Daisy, in Sister Gin."

* * *

Sister Gin breaks silence, lifts taboos, renames — transforming ... old wymyn from patriarchy's waste product to feminism's front line fighters. It uncovers the "revolutionary" potential of white Southern wymyn, of closeted "professional" dykes, of Lesbian alcoholics, even — controversially enough — of gin... It does all these things, and more — including a sensitive because tentative exploration of the betrayals of Southern Black wymyn by Southern white wymyn and the continuing links, twisted but still holding, between them. But in the back of that Trailways bus, I noticed none of these — only the forgotten feeling of release: release of courage, release of anger, release of laughter, release of female self. One long ecstatic whoosh....

Theory was failing me, journaling had driven me blathery, when miraculously it all appeared *there*, in a novel: the transformation of suppressed impulse into authentic female speech; the transformation of passivity into authentic female action (a gang of old wymyn stripping rapists, tying them to boards and leaving them in the streets is authentic, it must be, it gives me such profound satisfactions). It was all there: the transformations of consciousness, the peeling away of inhibitions — with the pullings back, the defections to cowardice, the spiralling progress, the ironies of Lesbian lives tumbling one on top of the other, oddly shaped crystals refracting light.

Sister Gin was not properly a "novel" at all to me; it was an

apparition.

* * *

...That plot? in that place? None of it was real, none of it was even possible. And yet.... Seven unlikely members of the Shirley Temples Emeritae captured more of the essential rebellion fermenting in seven drastik dykes than I could record, living that rebellion....

* * *

Checkpoint #4: December, 1977 Review of *Applesauce* by June Arnold...

Applesauce, while seeming to grow by putting out flowering shoots in all directions, as fantastically wild a novel as one could wish for, assumes finally the shape of a perfectly pruned parable.... In it, "the primary struggle of a woman to be a woman" emerges as a succession of violent self-transformations.

... my only criterion for choosing to include something, imagined or real, was whether or not it touched the floor of me.

(author's foreword, Applesauce)

The threads are all slipping from my hands. Get hold of your self, I tell my self, but which one? ... This time the environment is womynspace. An environment in which networks of womyn touching, two at a time, three, seven at a time, happen naturally, without expectation, without planning, without predetermination — touchings almost accidental, almost by design.

In writing my journal I tried to connect my life, some other wymyn's lives, all other wymyn's lives — I failed because I forced the connections. All I knew to do next was to help make another environment for another "journal" to grow in, and then lie in wait, watching for the touchings to begin, the synapses to spark, the messages to relay. . . .

Writing this "review," I begin to feel a bit the happiness of clarity. But the most important part is still missing — what it is that I so want, the tormenting, elusive object of my desire, desire and object conjured up whole by wymyn's words, cast down by wymyn's words, called up again and again by new words. The source. That which connects...

What is it I so want? Only this: the witch's doing. The power to transform energy. The power to juggle spheres of sound, the power to keep them in the air, the power to transmute the tumbling words into mirrors, crystal spheres glinting in the sun, reflecting doe wymyn, panther wymyn, gazelle wymyn. . . .

.... you didn't know you were a miracle? Look.

* * *

One thing leads to another . . . and the nature of all kinds of rapture, including this, is that it must clothe itself in disguise. . . . There is no ending that is, eventually, not happy.

(Bertha Harris, Lover, p. 208)

By the end of 1978, Daughters, Inc. had published: Angel Dance (M.F. Beal); Applesauce, The Cook and the Carpenter and Sister Gin (June Arnold); Born to Struggle (May Hobbs); Daughters in High School (ed., Frieda Singer); Early Losses (Pat Burch); Happenthing in Travel On (Carole Spearin McCauley); I Must Not Rock (Linda Marie); In Her Day and Rubyfruit Jungle (Rita Mae Brown); Lover (Bertha Harris); Nerves (Blanch Boyd); The Opoponax (Monique Wittig); The Pumpkin Eater (Penelope Mortimer); Riverfinger Women (Elana Nachman/Dykewomon); The Treasure (Selma Lagerlof); A True Story of a Drunken Mother (Nancy Lee Hall); You Can Have It When I'm Through with It (Betty Webb Mace).



Clementina, Lady Hawarden, was an enigmatic photographer born in Scotland in 1822. She married at 23, gave birth to a son and died at the age of 42. Graham Ovenden, editor of the only major publication dealing with her work, refers to her as being "like Vita Sackville-West, a mixture of the aristocratic north and the Mediterranean south."

In Hawarden's photographs, the women almost always touch each other, often they embrace. Some couples seem about to kiss, others look as if a shared intimacy had just been interrupted. If one individual were a man and the other a woman, the overt sexuality would be taken for granted. The photographic ambiguity is a result of our lack of biographical information combined with the Victorian exaltation of emotionally charged friendships between individuals of the same sex. Most of us have been taught to read sentimentality rather than sexuality into this type of image.

— from Tee Corinne (#5, 1978)

The Rape of Diana Interviews of Casey Czarnik and Coletta Reid

On October 25, 1977, between five and seven a.m., Diana Press, a publisher of Lesbian feminist books, was invaded by vandals who successfully eluded the alarm system, and using the chemicals at hand in the shop proceeded to damage negatives, plates, paste-up copy, unbound books, printing equipment, telephones, adding machines and typewriters; and to ransack files, storage

cabinets, desks. No one was ever arrested for this crime.

Coletta Reid — editor, writer, publisher — and Casey Czarnik — graphic artist, designer, printer — founded Diana Press in Baltimore in 1972. In the spring of 1977 the press moved to Oakland, Ca. Its structural principles, its political philosophy, and its economic policies have been the subject of serious, bitter controversy in feminist publishing. I have agonized a great deal over the issues ... and am not yet ready to write about it. But in December I knew that I wanted to talk to Coletta and Casey ... I met them in Chicago, where the three of us were attending the MLA convention. The following interview took place in the Ladies' Powder Room (the only place we could find to plug in the tape recorder) of the Palmer House on December 29, 1977.

Catherine: What was your immediate emotional response to the vandalism?

Coletta: I think the most upsetting part of what happened for me was coming in the shop that morning and seeing most of the work we'd done for the past five years destroyed. The original pasteup of *Songs to a Handsome Woman*, the first book we published, was torn down the middle on every page; and as I looked at it and saw back to the past — the many hours spent in setting type, pasting-up copy, hand collating that first book — I realized that this act of vandalism against us was truly that of people who hated women's culture and women's labor....

Casey:...I didn't feel anything right away —I was numb. I started calling the police and dealing with getting everyone home. I went immediately to survey the damage — check the presses out. My first impression was that the presses were not wrecked, but later I discovered that a lot of damage had been done to them — subtle things to water and ink systems that took hours to clean up. I wanted to see

it all so I could absorb it; I didn't want any surprises later...

Catherine: So you were suppressing your feelings ...?

Casey: Yes, I was really holding in, just reacting to necessity very practically, and I wouldn't allow a lot of emotion right away. Later I

couldn't sleep....Someone always had to be at the shop, I just couldn't go away and leave it. I felt it was vulnerable, that more could happen, that someone was out to get us, that someone really hated us, that it was really hateful and spiteful, and that someone would do it again. ... To this day, I can't go and look at the damage to the covers, because I know I'll have to redo a lot of art work....For awhile, I went around thinking how glad I was that I hadn't finished certain things — all my covers, all my artwork — because they would just have been destroyed anyway. And that's what my attitude has been since then — that I don't want to do extra work for fear that it will all be for nothing. It's been hard enough to go along these past six years because you never get full appreciation from people, but when you have a direct attack against you it's almost like someone is saying they don't want you to be alive.

Catherine: Had you ever in your whole life felt that strongly

violated?

Casey: No, you see, that's the longest period of my life that I've put so much of myself into what I still believe in, and felt that I had

really accomplished something worthwhile.

Coletta: My emotional reaction was very different from Casey's. I think I was the only person to burst into loud tears at the shop within five minutes... My first reaction and what I still think is that it was an attack by the FBI. I felt that they had known that we were on the verge finally of reaching a lot more women with our books and that they had stopped us. I started raging and screaming at the walls that every time we would reach the point of building more of a mass movement that they would stop us, and that I hated men, hated the pigs, hated the government, and I raged on and on. And I still feel that way — that we were at a point of publishing a book that had the possibility of reaching a lot more women and of getting our books into a lot more bookstores; that publishing the Elizabeth Gould Davis manuscript would have put us over that very tight margin to the point of being able to hire more women to be sales representatives around the country. I think that distribution and sales are the biggest problems women's presses have and we were trying to make enough money to solve these problems. And now we don't have the money to do what we planned for the next year. Financially the attack was so welldirected and so smart: it was aimed at our financial survival. We as a women's business are always so close to the edge of being able to continue, so an attack like this has been a severe blow — a disaster.

Catherine: Did you ever consider giving up?

Coletta: Yes. I didn't think that right away, but about three weeks later I went into a severe depression in which I felt like it wasn't worth

it anymore, and the reason why I think I went into that depression was that we were not able to make any kind of comeback ... after three weeks of hard work, of keeping our morale up as best we could, we were still unable to operate as a print shop. And I think that that's when the full impact of what the vandalism meant hit me. Up until then I'd kept thinking that with a lot of hard work we can get back in production again, but in fact, they effectively ruined our production for three months... they effectively got rid of the reprints so we didn't have any Ladder books to sell yet. So then I thought why is it worth it? why have I been killing myself working 12 hours a day for six years, why have I taught myself skills that are hard, stood up to male printers, male salesmen, male bookstores, and for no reason, in order to be crushed within a half hour? The vulnerability of women's culture and of women who are independent and try to stand on their own really struck me. And the necessity for women to bond together to support each other was crucial at that point, because I felt that without the support of women across the country, who sent us dollar bills, who sent us letters, who sent us postcards, who said don't bother to write and thank me just continue, was the only thing that saved me at that point.

Casey: Coming on this trip is to try to raise our morale.

Catherine: Has it helped?

Casey: Oh yes, it's been very good. It's been important to talk to people who felt that what Diana Press is doing is good and valuable.

But when I see the press operating again, I'll feel better.

Coletta: I think one of the things that has been crucial to Diana Press and has distinguished us from other women publishers has been that we've felt this tremendous commitment to production, to women gaining control of production by actually learning to do the work themselves, and what Casey and I get the most personal satisfaction out of is seeing things run and seeing finished books come out that we can hold and flip through and say, look how well this is typeset, and look how beautifully printed it is, and look at the binding, and so when nothing is running, it's like we have nothing to get hold of in terms of satisfaction. I think we're both very tied to the production in terms of how we feel about ourselves and our work, and the production was what they stopped.

Among the books printed by Diana Press were: Edward the Dyke and Other Poems and She Who by Judy Grahn; Pit Stop and Child of Myself by Pat Parker; Sex Variant Women in Literature by Jeannette Foster; The Ladder Anthologies edited by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid; Class and Feminism, Lesbianism and the Women's Movement and Women Remembered edited by Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron.

Writing and Politicking as Privilege

Once there was a bright, strong woman who lived in an ordinary town. She had always had a natural curiosity and loved learning, but because of her poor background, she tried to prepare herself for a life of working, instead of taking courses to prepare herself for college. Her knowledge of the world was that if you didn't work, you didn't eat, and to attend college was out of the question. Like many women of her class, however, marriage seemed a way out; having babies kept her out of work for a short period, but added to her responsibilities, along with housework and a regular paid job. Her job was necessary because there was never enough money for living expenses, not to mention luxuries.

She always wanted to write, but never felt educated enough, and when her marriage ended after three years and the total responsibility for her own support and her two children fell completely on her, there

was little time to think, let alone try to write.

When the women's movement began attracting her attention in the late 1960's, she felt it was something she could relate to — after all, she worked for a living, was as independent as she could possibly be. and didn't depend on men for anything. What she found in the women's movement was a lot of talking and writing, study groups, and intimidation. Those women were educated and they wanted people to know it! If men would not listen to them, women would have to. It was so difficult to understand a lot of what was being written, because of all the big words used, and the language was so different. She also discovered that what all the theory boiled down to was simply rhetoric — none of it dealt with the reality of the lives of most women she knew, including her own. She felt she had to try to be like the educated women in the women's movement to be accepted. It was almost the same as when she was growing up; the sense of not being as good, not being middle class, not having the privilege of making choices for herself. Ironically, it was those women who made her become class conscious as she had never been before. When she was younger, she had pretty much accepted who she was, although she hated her class position and was often made to feel ashamed of being poor.

What angered her a lot was that she tried to *live* her life according to her principles; she tried to change her life, working with women, trying to learn, and trying to educate as well. She saw many of her ideas go down the drain because she was neither speaker nor writer enough to express her ideas "properly." It was made clear to her that she lacked "credentials," and she remained a patronized "token."

So she decided to go back to college, which turned into a disaster. Because she was an outspoken feminist, she had trouble. She was always having to compromise, just to be allowed to swallow all that male propaganda (which she had discovered "higher learning" was all about). She was the only student in the local junior college women's association and had the same feelings of intimidation she experienced in the women's movement; even though she had more experience working with women, she lacked those goddamn "credentials."

She quit school and had a nervous breakdown and it was in the psychiatric ward that she came out as a Lesbian to herself. She became part of the Lesbian community and began reading Lesbian writings.

More frustration.

This intrepid would-be writer finds herself trying to make sense of the theoretical works of women like Daly, Rich and others and falling on her face. She still feels without credentials, unknowledgeable, ignorant.

And she is sad and angry.

Sad that Lesbians must use the elitist, bullshit language and style of the university. Angry that men are able to read Lesbian works when Lesbians are not able to.

Sad and angry that there seems to be a Lesbian "star" system. Sad and angry that there is plenty of educated theory and not enough everyday practice. The competition among Lesbian writers for being the loudest (if not the clearest) voice seems apparent. Does all that male education really work for women, or does it trap them squarely in male values? Does it really take prestige and credentials for even Lesbians to be heard?

In the words of one young working-class Lesbian friend, commenting on Lesbian writing, "Sometimes I feel like becoming a separatist — separating myself from the whole Lesbian trip, including separatists!"

What happens to women like these who have something to say, important ideas to express? Where is their vehicle, if not in Lesbian publications? These women use the oral tradition that women have

used through the ages, having no other way. They pass their culture along to each other through love and trust, denying the patriarchal value system. They defy the twin oppressions of "scholarship" and "authority" without loss of any intelligence, living out their beliefs without benefit of male approval. Their language is not of the university, but of love of each other — and no amount of theory will change that.

Perhaps more women would or could write (in their own way) about what they are thinking and doing if it were their "vocation." But most women who are fighting for economic survival don't have that privilege, and writing is a privilege. Lesbian and feminist presses need to take a hard look at who they are reaching, writers at who they are writing for, publishers who they are publishing, and at the privilege they have as a result. The dominance of degreed, "star" writers in Lesbian and feminist publications smacks of elitism and tells of their politics. The seduction of the university is complete. Their "products" control Lesbian and feminist publishing and writing, and they in turn continue to oppress working-class women.

It's an easy way out to write for the academic crows; it's a far more difficult task to write for the common woman.



Linda Marie Nolte (#37, 1989)

ASoliloquy on the Thousand Mysteries of Women to be read in a wry, shy voice

 $oxed{1}$ t's true, I think sometimes I'm beautiful and strong and kind, and I don't know why a thousand women aren't indicating any passion toward me. That's when I figure there must be some defect invisible to my own eves that gleams blindingly to all others and scares them from me. But then I think, there are at least a thousand women whom I find wondrous and why is my own passion not urging me toward them? So perhaps, I muse, it's a secret mass stand off — leaving us all hungry and longing. There are, I realize, at least a thousand different preconditions to ardent acceptance considered essential by each woman alive. Often I can then surmise that the next logical step is that I clearly must have my own thousand preconditions too and so what the hell are they anyway? Maybe everyone has a thousand known and unknown ones and is secretly (even to herself) somehow looking for a matching thousand. As I continue musing in this vein, the assorted aforementioned thousands already make a pile so steep that I start searching for a witch broom to sweep psychic house. Of course I know I write brave home alone making love to myself, but in the bar

your house, those meetings, that dance this dinner,

Ismell all the Reasons It Won't Work, which is I know I know the odor really from the passive gas that permeates our female mental atmosphere. Ah — but when the microsecond wedge of hesitation looms between us, it carries fear and awkwardness and detachment, not only from each other, but from the feelings within one's womanself that grease the skids, oil the joints, lubricate the impulses, propel the pulse, move the questions, engage the encounter. Anyhow, that's how I experience it these days. It's certainly not defensible and I'd abandon it in a minute if I could feel it go. But somehow it's still just there — a mystery in a plain brown wrapper. It's not even that I don't see bridges between us, you understand. There are in fact easily a thousand bridges. It's just that we're all standing in the middle of different ones.

from Neither Profit Nor Salvation

Note: The following speech was given by Barbara Grier as Keynote speaker on Lesbian Day at the Women's Week festival at San Jose State Univ. on March 10, 1977.

In the last several months while I've prepared, or tried to prepare, to speak to you today, I've often thought — talking to myself in the mirror, riding back and forth to work, — how extremely arrogant it is for anyone to get up in front of a group and pretend to be able to discuss in 15, 20, 40 minutes the subject of Lesbians and Lesbianism.

I'm 43 years old. I've spent virtually my entire life from age 14 studying the subject.... There are millions of Lesbians in the United States. Not thousands nor hundreds of thousands, but millions of women who are Lesbians. We have many things in common, but we have many more things not in common with one another....

Probably the Lesbians sitting in this room have a little higher sense of what we call "consciousness" but maybe not even that, because I'll bet there are some closeted Lesbians in this room, too. In fact, there are probably a few secret Lesbians sitting out there listening to me now. And as I'm talking, you're beginning to shake inside or squirm a little. There's bound to be some of you out there. There are always some of you in every room where there are a few women, always. Every time you ride a bus and there are a handful of women on the bus, someone on that bus is probably a closet Lesbian, maybe several someones on that bus. In fact, the closet, that ridiculous place, may be just exactly the only other thing we have in common besides the basic one, that we are Lesbians.

...Now, even the closet folk have differing levels of "closetism"...I guess we'll coin a word. Some of us live in closets part of the time, some of us live in closets, say 75% of the time and 25% we're out of the closet. We have select people to be out of the closet with. We're out of the closet with all of our gay friends, for example, and five select heterosexual individuals that we've chosen throughout our lives to decide to confer the great honor on them of telling them that we're Lesbians, and holding very still for a few moments and looking into their eyes for fear they'll flinch, back up, turn away, reject us outright, as if it mattered. As if it mattered a damn bit. It is the closet that is our sin and shame.

There's been a lot of talk since the late 1960's about coming out of the closet. There've been marches and speeches. There'll be many more speeches, at least, if not so many marches since marching doesn't seem to be this year's thing.... There will be another tiny percentile point rise at the end of the year of visible Lesbians. This or that artist, this or that writer, this or that composer, this or that politician, this or that priest, this or that minister. A few more of us will come out of the closet. Come out, come out, wherever you are. That will be very good for them and that will be very good for the handful of people whose lives they touch and it will probably even be somewhat beneficial for the Lesbians who have access to their public derring-do and take some comfort from their acts.

But coming out of the closet is getting to be less and less of an option and more and more of an obligation... It's a moral obligation. It's not a matter of coming out of the closet because it's good for you. It's not a matter of coming out because it's good for your lover, because you're going to feel better, because it'll eventually loosen up your relationships with your neighbors or help at work. It has nothing to do with that. You need to come out of the closet because you know you're a Lesbian and every one of you who stays in the closet makes it harder for the woman down the street to come out of the closet. We help oppress each other, we are our own oppression. We even have a few women out there who are ashamed of being Lesbians. That's hard to imagine, I know, but it's true. There are still Lesbians out there who are ashamed of being Lesbians. Incomprehensible, illogical, of course, but it exists. Now, there are a few people who remain in the closet and enjoy being uncomfortable about being Lesbians, and I'm not sure if anything I say here today is going to have any effect on any of them....

But it's not a matter of choice any longer. I'm not really asking you to come out of the closet, I'm telling you. You have to come out of the closet, you have to come out. Not only do you have to, but the time has come where those of us who are out of the closet need to put pressure on those who are in. And I don't mean unkind pressure but real pressure.... I mean make those women who are Lesbians and know they are Lesbians stand up and be counted. It is time to do so. Once again, I am not advocating that you run around with sandwich boards, I am not saying you need to go out on the street and chalk it in front of your house. I am saying that you need to start acting like who you really are. Don't lie, don't pretend. Behave as you are, you're a Lesbian, act like a Lesbian, be glad you're a Lesbian, tell the world you're a Lesbian, subtly, of course. But make sure that every thinking, intelligent person anywhere around you, that has any relationship with you, however casual, is aware or likely to be aware of your orientation. It's the least you can do for the cause, it's the least you can

do for your own people. We have a terrible disadvantage — we aren't marked in some clear cut way. We can't be seen, we aren't visible. As others have suggested, I too wish we'd all wake up lavender some morning and solve part of the problem. We cannot be seen and because we can't be seen, we can pretend, and in years past, perhaps there were reasons for it. Perhaps it was better, perhaps it was easier to pretend.

But it's not good anymore, it's not healthy, it doesn't feel good, it's not good for you, and it's very bad for the movement. It's very bad for the future. It's extremely bad for the young Lesbians now, the 10-year olds, the 15-year olds, the ones who are 20 and looking to us for examples. Why not make this world a little easier for everyone who comes after us? It's really not too much to ask. Don't we owe the world that? Shouldn't our passage through it enrich it? Shouldn't our having lived mean something good for those who come after us? And what about our own lives? There are an awful lot of young people in this world. Why should we reinforce in them fear for the safety of any job? Why should you for a minute imagine that you have to fear for your job? One of the reasons that women are having trouble in universities and in businesses on a professional level is the closet. Many women who would be active in the women's movement, women who have the knowledge and the wherewithall to do wonders are cautious in many cases because they fear that if they rock the boat about feminism, someone will come out with the fact that they're closet Lesbians and rock their boat back a little. I've heard that argument offered up so many times, I can't count it. The way to combat it is to come out first.

What it boils down to is this: when you start counting the women who have succeeded on an historical level, you find that virtually all famous women were Lesbians. Not all, but virtually all. Such enormous quantities of them, such a proportion far out of reasonable belief that you're forced to come up with one of two conclusions. Either almost every woman must be a Lesbian given the choice to be, which happens to be my personal opinion, or, if you can't accept that, you must at least accept that those women who step out in the world and do something important in it are Lesbians. It is unrealistic to believe that some social body is going to turn upon all of the successful and creative women in the world and put them out of commission by some kind of mass genocide. I rather doubt that that's going to happen. For one thing, there are far too many women for it to happen. If all the Lesbians come out of the closet, think how many famous women that's going to concern. Think for a minute in your head about every entertainer you can name who is gay, every movie star that you know is a Lesbian. Think about that for a few minutes.

...So when all these women come out, including all the women who work in factories and on switchboards and run elevators and work for Macy's as I do, when all the women come out, how is it going to change the world? Well, for one thing, it's going to make it easier for all of us to live in the world. It's going to make it impossible for people to be fired for being Lesbians because it is going to be extremely difficult to fire all the Lesbians and still run all the businesses, and all the schools, and all the universities, and all the churches because you cannot get rid of all your talent and keep everything moving forward properly. And an awful lot of talent would have to go. But I'm not really asking or cajoling or convincing, I'm trying to tell you in as kind a way as I can that it's time to come out of the closet and it's time to make sure everyone around you comes out of the closet too....

Now, coming out, despite everything you ever heard or feared, is not difficult. I came out when I was 12 years old. I have been out ever since and I have been out with all the people I've ever been around. And I'm not a special and not a privileged person. I worked in a non-professional position in a public library. I worked for a mutual fund, ... [for] the Singer Sewing Machine Co., Pyramid Life Insurance, Macy's Department Store where I have a ... perfectly ordinary puncha-timeclock kind of job, but every person in Macy's knows who I am and what I do. There was an article about my life in *Christopher Street* that went all over my department. Everybody in the place read it and everyone came and talked to me. My boss, who is a stereotype malechauvinist pig, oppressive person who dislikes everything ... even

my boss finds somehow an obscure pride in my openness.

But I'm not asking you, I'm telling you that you have to come out of the closet. We have to, we all have to be out, we have to because there's nowhere else to go. We've done all we can do as a small, isolated, spotlighted public movement. It's not enough that every year a few thousand kids come out of high school and decide, boy, oh boy, I'm going to break with the enemy, my family, I'm going out and I'm going to live my life. ... Right now, I want all of those women over 25 or so who have jobs and responsibilities and a life of their own and [think] ... I-did-it-all-myself, let-them-drag-themselves-up-by-theirbootstraps, I don't owe them anything. But you do. You owe them plenty. You owe them your wit and wisdom. You owe them all the suffering you went through passed by, the right not to have to go through it all just like you did. It's not that it wouldn't make them stronger, perhaps, but it's just not necessary anymore. What is necessary is coming out. Coming out every day in every way. Neither for profit nor salvation, but because this is the time to come out.

Julia Penelope, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich (#6, 1978)

from The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action

The Lesbians and Literature Panel of the 1977 Annual Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago. Chair: Julia P. Stanley; Participants: Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel, Adrienne Rich. Attended by 700 women.

Julia Penelope Stanley:

This afternoon's panel grew out of an MLA panel last year on which Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich and Honor Moore spoke to us about the relationship between their identity as wimmin, as Blacks, as Lesbians, and their poetry. Last year I learned how little wimmin understand about any of the language that I claim as essential to my identity.

Too often in my past I've felt alienated in an environment such as this, felt that the structure, atmosphere, architecture, of academic meetings eroded, devoured the meaning of my words, made my syntax hemorrhage; I would feel my connections to my language drain away, dissolve. Last year at MLA I sat with tears in my eyes listening to an unknown woman object to Adrienne Rich's statement that there "is a Lesbian in every womon," saying that she could not accept the "freudian implications of the word Lesbian." I raged in silence, torn, wounded, not knowing how to explain that, although I had loved wimmin, and only wimmin, emotionally, physically, sexually, for 24 years, I had not been able to let the word Lesbian pass my lips in all those years; that in 1972, when I first tried to apply that name to myself, I stuttered, I whispered, I choked. Last year, I still didn't know how to explain the importance of that word in my life to other wimmin. This panel grew out of my silence last year.

Naming ourselves; naming our lives; naming our actions. Without language, I am nameless, I am invisible, I am silent. If I refuse language, I refuse myself. Through my language, I define myself to myself; I can "see" myself. My language always goes before me, illuminating my actions; through my language, I create myself, for myself, and for other wimmin.

Last year, I found myself telling another womon my coming out story, the story of how and when I had become a Lesbian, in all the senses in which I now use that word. I was telling her the story of my life. I halted, stumbled, paused through that narration. My story was broken by long silences while I groped in my mind for words, phrases, metaphors through which I might communicate myself to her. I wanted her to understand me as I understand me, and I discovered in that telling that my life, my coming out, was a narrative of silences, the silence of denial, of self-hatred, of pain. Later, I told another womon of that long and painful narration. She asked, "Did you tell her everything?" I said, "Yes. Everything I thought was important." She said, once again, "Did you tell her everything? Did you tell her about your long silences with other wimmin?" And I was glad that I could say, "Yes. I told her about my long silences, my pain, my muteness."

Too many of us still want to believe that language is a trivial, irrelevant issue, that it is not a wimmin's concern. The patriarchy devalues language in two ways: First, we are told that continued use of masculinist English, e.g., he, man, mankind, bitch, chairman, etc., is "correct," and that changing the language is both useless and impossible! Second, within the patriarchy, language is used to deceive, to coerce, to protect those who hold power. Wimmin can't allow the boys to continue to control English (or any other language). We must make English our own, in our way, to serve our purposes. We must end the millennia of silence about our lives; if we don't we will be unable to define our lives in ways that're different from what we know now. As a Lesbian, I understand the importance of language in my life. With language, I can claim aspects of myself that I've denied, express ideas that have been suppressed and tabooed for a long time. With language, I can define my life as real, and I can act to change my life. The wimmin I've asked to be here this afternoon understand language and silence and language and action

Audre Lorde:

I would like to preface my remarks on the transformation of silence into language and action with a poem. The title of it is "A Song for Many Movements" and this reading is dedicated to Winnie Mandala....

Nobody wants to die on the way caught between ghosts of whiteness and the real water none of us wanted to leave our bones on the way to salvation three planets to the left a century of light years ago our spices are separate and particular but our skins sing in complimentary keys at a quarter to eight mean time we were telling the same stories over and over and over.

Broken down gods survive in the crevasses and mudpots of every beleaguered city where it is obvious there are too many bodies to cart to the ovens or gallows and our uses have become more important than our silence after the fall too many empty cases of blood to bury or burn there will be no body left to listen and our labor has become more important than our silence.

Our labor has become more important than our silence.

(from Audre Lorde's The Black Unicorn, W.W. Norton & Co., 1978)

In listening to Mary I was struck by how many of the same words seem to come up.... words such as war, separation, fear, and the ways in which those words are intimately connected with our battlings against silence, and the distortions silence commits upon us. I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been. Less than two months ago, I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

But within those three weeks, I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger. This is a situation faced by many women, by some of you here today. Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the trans-

formation of silence into language and action.

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and by what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change, or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength

and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.

The women who sustained me through that period were black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge — within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not, I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work,

come to ask you, are you doing yours?

And, of course, I am afraid — you can hear it in my voice — because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside of you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder

and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside."

In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear — fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the very visibility without which we also cannot truly live. Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we still will be no less afraid.

In my house this year we are celebrating the feast of Kwanza, the African-American festival of harvest which begins the day after Christmas and lasts for seven days. There are seven principles of Kwanza, one for each day. The first principle is Umoja, which means unity, the decision to strive for and maintain unity in self and community. The principle for yesterday, the second day, was Kujichagulia — self-determination — the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others. Today is the third day of Kwanza, and the principle for today is Ujima — collective work and responsibility — the decision to build and maintain ourselves and our communities together and to recognize and solve our problems together.

Each one of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation, and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

For those of us who write, to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For

others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

And it is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, insilence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now, that if I were to have been born mute, and had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to



Audre Lorde photo by Lynda Koolish (#10, 1979)

our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own: for instance, "I can't possibly teach black women's writings — their experience is so different from mine," yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another: "She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or "She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?" Or again, "This woman writes of her sons and I have no children." And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak now these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

Adrienne Rich:

Many of the ideas in what follows belong to a continuing, non-linear, meditation and colloquy ... everything I say here has been touched in some way by other women writers, thinkers, teachers and students, without whose work my own would be impoverished.

I would like to speak this afternoon of silence as a crucial element in civilization. Of namelessness, denial, secrets, taboo subjects, erasure, false-naming, non-naming, encoding, omission, veiling, fragmentation and lying. Because time is short, I will be able only to speak these words in your ears, hoping that hearing the forms of silence named will keep us all alert for its presence, aware that it has many presences. Most of all I would like to speak of how the <code>unspoken</code>—that which we are forbidden or dread to name and describe—becomes the <code>unspeakable</code> (as in the phrase <code>unspeakable acts</code>); how the nameless becomes the invisible. And I am going to suggest some thoughts to you about the acts of writing and teaching, as a choice between collusion with silence, or revolt against silence.

One of the most recent voices that has entered this meditation and colloquy is that of Barbara Smith, in her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." She writes of the interconnections between the violence committed by white racist culture against Black women, the violence committed by homophobic culture — white and Black — against Lesbians, the

^{*} Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in Conditions #2.

blotting-out by literature and literary criticism — including that written by Black males and white feminists — of the lives of Black women and most utterly the lives of Black Lesbians. I urge you to find and read this essay, because it addresses eloquently a silence that imprisons all women, white or Black, Lesbian or heterosexual. In other words, I urge each of you to read it for her own sake, not for the sake of Black or Lesbian women. We cannot escape collusion with racism or homophobia simply by having "humanistic" intentions, by a desire to be politically liberal, or in the belief that we are in revolt against silence for anyone's sake but our own.

I want to re-examine here, however briefly, the terms "racism" and "homophobia" because they too seem to me in need of redefining, and, in the case of "homophobia," re-naming. The instrumentality of white women in the perpetration of inhumanity against Black people is a fact of history. So also is the instrumentality of women of the same race against each other, or against our own children: the horizontal and misdirected violence born of a sense of impotence. White women have collaborated actively and passively with racism. Our brains and our affections have been poisoned by its fumes, but there is another tale to be told as well....

I believe that we must recognize and reclaim an anti-racist female tradition, closely entwined though not identical with feminist tradition. This history has been erased, both by Black and white-Leftist documenters of the Black movement, for whom the only "leaders" (with the token exception of Angela Davis) are men; and by white male historians who have erased or trivialized in their texts not only the suffrage and birth control movements and the socialist feminism of the '20s and '30s, but the activism of women like the Grimké sisters, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Lillian Smith, Fannie Lou Hamer.

But the mutual history of Black and white women in this country is a realm so painful and resonant that it has barely been touched by writers either of political "science" or of imaginative literature.... a great deal of white feminist theorizing, where it has dealt with racism at all, has done so laboring under a burden of liberal guilt and false consciousness, the products of a long-inculcated female guilt and self-blame. It is time we shed this un-useful burden and look freshly at the concepts of racism and responsibility. To understand we have been, not the creators of racism, but often its instruments, is not to deny or trivialize that instrumentality; it is, perhaps, for the first time, to recognize and resolve to end it.

^{*} I say "Black" and not "Third World" because although separation by skin color is by no means limited to Black and white women, Black women and white women in this country have a special history of polarization as well as of mutual oppression and mutual activism.

Women did not create the power relationship between master and slave, nor the mythologies used to justify it, which so strongly resemble the mythologies used to justify the domination of man over woman. Women in revolt against the ideologies of slavery and segregation—two dominant themes of patriarchy—have most often worked from a position of powerlessness, while men in power have called our sense of justice "emotionalism," dismissing our voices and acts of protest because we have had no collective leverage of our own to bring to the struggles we undertook on behalf of others. And white feminists have too readily tolerated the charge that "white, middleclass women" or "bourgeois white women," are rather despicable creatures of privilege whose oppression is trivial beside the oppression of Black and Third world women. This ... charge of "racism" [was] made in the most obscene ill-faith by middle-class white males against white women fighting for collective autonomy. An analysis that places the burden of racism on white women does not only compound false consciousness: it neglects the profound interconnections between Black and white women from the historical conditions of slavery on; and it does not permit any real examination of the nature of female instrumentality in a system which oppresses all women.

As a Lesbian/feminist my nerves and my flesh as well as my intellect tell me that the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet. I need to understand more about the connections between Black and white women.... How have white women projected our own sexuality, our own feelings of deviance, onto Black women, not to speak of our own rage? What illusions of the other's Amazonism or incompetence, glamor or disability, sexuality or sexlessness, still imprint our psyches, and where did we receive these impressions? How did the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's explode the long-dormant reservoirs of intensity between Black and white women? How has the Black man, how has the white man, gained from polarizing the "white bitch" and the "nigger cunt"? Why have questions like these remained unspeakable?

In her *Conditions* article, Barbara Smith says that she would like "to encourage in white women a sane accountability to all the women who live and write on this soil." Speaking as a white Lesbian/feminist, I would add that for this accountability to be truly sane, it cannot be nourished by guilt, nor by "correct politics" nor by the false consciousness born of powerless responsibility; nor can it be felt as an accountability to some shadowy "other," the Black Woman, the myth, it cannot, above all, be founded in ignorance. If we begin to recognize what the separation

of Black and white women means, it must become clear that it means separation from ourselves. Breaking silence about our past means breaking silence about what the politics of skin color, of white and Black male mythology and sexual politics, have meant to us, and listening closely as Black women tell us what it has meant for them. Why should we feel more alien to the literature and lives of Black women than to centuries of the writings and experience of white men? Which of these two cultures is most truly significant to us as we struggle to build a female vision? And what, for a feminist, can passive racism mean but that we passively consent to remain the instruments of men, who have always profited from colonialism, imperialism, slavery, enforced heterosexuality and motherhood, organized prostitution and pornography, and the separation of women from each other?

The past ten years of feminist writing and speaking, saying our own words or attempting to, have shown us that it is the realities civilization tells us are regressive or unspeakable which prove our deepest resources. Female anger. Love between women. The tragic, potent bond between mother and daughter. The fact that a woman may rejoice in creating with her brain and not with her uterus. The actualities of Lesbian motherhood. The sexuality of older women. The connections — painful, oblique and often bitter — between white and Black women, including shame, manipulation, betrayal, contempt, hypocrisy, envy, and love. If we have learned anything in our coming to language out of silence, it is that what has been kept unspoken, therefore *unspeakable*, in us is what is threatening to the patriarchal order in which men control, first women, then all who can be defined

and exploited as "other." All silence has a meaning.

And so if we re-examine the term "racism" from a feminist position, we must also take a closer look at the term "homophobia" (meaning the fear of same-gender erotic feelings, in oneself and in others). I suggest that it is an inadequate and misleading term — a form of silence, or false-naming, or veiling — where the fear of Lesbianism is concerned. What all women live with, what feminists and Lesbians have consciously to confront, is *gynophobia*: the age-old male fear, and hatred, of women, which women too inhale like poisonous fumes, from the air we breathe daily. This is a qualitatively and politically different question from the fear of male homosexuality. The gynophobia directed at all women is more virulently and violently directed at the Lesbian because she is most clearly "disloyal to civilization," in choosing women to be at the center of her life. Women, like Blacks, are seen as needing to be controlled, as embodiments of the "dark" unconscious, inferior in intellectual quality,

marginal, guilty victims, dangerous. Violence against women, like violence against Blacks, is rationalized, condoned, and, in the case of women, encouraged by pornography. And so I would like to urge upon all women, Black or white, who are teaching literature, or writing it, or writing about it, an accountability to the Lesbian in themselves, a commitment to hear her and give her space, to speak for her, however stifled she may have become, however faint her voice or blurred her visage. Accountability to Lesbian experience, literature and history is accountability to what has been unspoken and unspeakable. As writers, as scholars, as teachers, we have a choice: to name or not to name. But non-naming is also action: the adding of yet another layer—our own—to the walls that entomb a part of the truth, a part of our freedom.

Silence. Denial. Secrets. Taboo. False-naming. Erasure. Encoding. Omission. Veiling. Non-naming. Fragmentation. Lying. Against this texture or tissue of the unspoken, what wonder if Emily Dickinson exhorted herself to "Tell all the Truth — but tell it Slant —"; that the words of Phyllis Wheatley that come down to us give us only a ghost of her lifelong pain; or that Gertrude Stein wrote that poetry is "of naming something of really naming that thing by its name" yet that "in Tender Buttons and then on and on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns, I knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something." If the noun or name for something is *unspeakable* and the writer is committed to her own meaning, she may, as Stein did, adopt desperate strategies....

There is so much to be done. Feminist scholars and theorists still need to examine the question of how institutionalized heterosexuality has served to buttress patriarchy, the control by men of women's minds, bodies and energies. Hetero-feminism is still not feminism in its wholeness, any more than a feminism which engages in passive racism is worthy the name. If in the study and teaching of literature we fail to listen for the silences underlying the poetry of heterosexual romance, if we are not attuned to the gaps in language, the unwritten scenes and absent characters of the novel, the encoded messages in the writing actually before us, we are failing as scholars and educators in the task of bringing-to-light, rescuing from oblivion, exposing both the limits and the untouched possibilities of literature....

Some portions of this talk later appeared in my essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia" (in *Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. NY: WW Norton, 1979).

Mariam

 Γ rom where Phoebe stands, just outside the door, only Mariam's back is visible as she leans forward in her chair to point something out to the little sister, her broad, stretching back and the long black leather coat like a scholar's robes or bat wings momentarily obstructing Phoebe's view of the girl. Phoebe smiles, but that fades as quickly as if it has been met by a frown. The girl is fascinated by Mariam's stories of Georgia, or her army days in France, or her coming out on the southside of Chicago in 1953, and if Phoebe could read lips it would only take a few words for her to recall which story. She'd listened to Mariam and heard them all. Three years ago, when she was only eighteen and unsure what to say to strangers Mariam had filled their hours by talking about herself. She took Phoebe and they wove back through the beauty and repulsiveness to the time she lost her eye in a fight with her first lover to the houseparties and rentparties and marriages and how she performed a ceremony herself in '58 and the couple was still together. Sometimes she talked so softly that it seemed she spoke to herself but Phoebe listened to the older woman and learned things that other women her age never knew existed.

At the time Mariam's words had been golden, they still were she knew by watching in the girl's eyes a subdued kind of awe that only escaped from adolescents in the presence of an adult they truly respected.

She walks slowly back to the desk, pulls out the chair but then just walks past it and over to a shelf of neatly arranged books and begins to straighten them. Nothing will get done in the store today she knows, so she won't even attempt it. Laughter comes from the little office. It angers her. Not because she isn't part of the laughter, jealousy could be dealt with. This is something that the thought and sight of Mariam, and even recalling her words, stirs. A keen anger at the woman who has taught her so much and scary wishes that she had never learnt it. And then a thick shame at having this anger towards another black woman.

She whirls abruptly and goes into the office with them, slamming the door purposely to scatter their words. But Mariam and the girl have an energetic rap going about Cuba and Phoebe knows how it is, for a couple of years ago when she was only interested in style and the latest dances, Mariam could coax her to Brooklyn and the lament of the Haitian refugees there. Mariam is a history teacher and Phoebe's anger softens a little. She sits listening to them for maybe a whole half hour before her gaze rests on the older woman and she stops hearing her words and grows sour again. "Goddamn butches." She says the words far beneath a whisper and as close to tenderness as to anger.

The first time that she saw Mariam the woman was enfolded in butch like a bat inside its wings and upside down, leaning against the bar with the patch over one eye which sucked attention to her stern chocolate face. Phoebe's gaze had traveled over Mariam's vest and black leather coat down to the pair of cowboy boots keen enough at the toe to go up a rat's behind; Phoebe had decided now here was a butch with class at least, and had forgiven her a little. But not quite enough. Walking down the street people stared, did double-takes at the woman they thought was a man. It angered Phoebe that they thought she wanted an imitation man — any man — and she became silent and didn't talk to Mariam. And did not answer Mariam's questions.

A customer comes into the store and Phoebe goes out to wait on her, but the woman only wants to browse so Phoebe paces the room, swinging her arms like a bored child, blanking her mind, trying to savor only the sweetness of Mariam.

The word bulldyke was something that she could not deal with, its connotations violated every sensitive thought that she had ever had about herself; she was lesbian and she was gay. She was not what the sisters in her family called 'bulldyke' and pronounced only in hushed or sneering tones. 'Bulldykes' were tightlipped and when they spoke every other word was a curse word, 'bulldykes' got puking drunk everytime they set foot in a bar, they beat women with their fists, they looked at women like men did, and, of course, they dressed like a man. The sisters said all this about `bulldyke'; the words lesbian and gay weren't in their vocabulary until Phoebe put them there. She called herself a lesbian and acted like she always did and treated them like she always had; their keen sense of threat had nearly been laid to rest, and then along came Mariam. The sisters saw her and shot Phoebe an `uh huh' look and went quiet.

`Bulldyke,' of course, was a part like `sissy' or like `preacher,' but when Phoebe cautiously mentioned this to Mariam all she did was chuckle and talk about being wold-fashioned.' If Phoebe insisted she said less and less, so, afraid that Mariam would start avoiding her, or worse, get tightlipped, Phoebe accepted the 'bulldyke' part, always

weaving past it anyway to the woman she called her friend. Then last winter, when she quit work and returned to school, she moved in with Mariam to save money.

She walks towards the door, stares through it at the street, stares until her eyes strain and squint and stares until they pull and become wet with pain because for the second time that afternoon, to remedy an anger growing scary, she is recounting the detail of last winter.

They became tight. They went to movies together, they barhopped and danced and looked at women together and they gave each other time apart when Phoebe went to meetings and classes and Mariam watched television. Phoebe was becoming more and more involved in politics and the two of them talked for hours about black politics, but when she mentioned gay issues the conversation waned. She talked then and Mariam nodded and smiled. The time or two that she practically dragged Mariam to gay rallies, the older woman merely reared back in her chair and looked and made unsettling remarks about the 'white boys' who ran it. Sometimes she fell asleep and displayed her scorn by snoring. But when the meeting was over and everybody filed out they all somehow meshed with the other people on the street and Mariam was the only one who resembled the issues discussed. Mariam was who all the eyes followed. And sometimes Phoebe would walk down the sidewalk shoulder to shoulder with her friend and sometimes she would walk as far apart as she dared.

In the apartment just below Mariam's lived Thompson, a gay brother with his hi-fi speakers on the ceiling and usually loud enough for their whole end of the building to hear. The reason that nobody complained, it soon became obvious, was that he played the right kind of music. Mariam had long ago made his acquaintance. She would occasionally even make special requests by stomping on the livingroom floor, three stomps for Al Green, four for the Emotions, and he would cut short whatever he was playing and comply immediately. Sometimes Thompson came over with Sonia and she brought Mexican soul food and she and Thompson would put on salsa and invent new steps and teach them all at the same time. Mariam would call to Phoebe from the kitchen, "this is the gay rally right here baby, gay tarry meeting, gay revival meeting. Sunday go-to-meeting meeting it's all right here and no white boys allowed." Phoebe partied too.

Sisters. Thompson said he was tight with the sisters. He stopped the sisters of their building on their way from the grocery store, the day care center, on their way to pick up the mail and introduced them to Phoebe. They smiled coolly. Phoebe was familiar with the nature of that smile; a sissy kept abreast of all the latest fashions and knew how to rap what the New York models were doing with their hair like a beauty pageant moderator and he invited them over for elaborate meals and movie star gossip. Sissies were fun; but the women didn't have no use for lesbians.

Phoebe hurt. She would wear her brother's air force jacket then, and say that they were going to look at her funny anyhow so why leave any doubt in their minds and she and Mariam would be 'butch' together. But it was easier not to, because then she could talk to sisters on the street, on the bus, at the laundromat, sisters she'd never seen before and it would be alright to. She pulled off the jacket, walked differently and looked at Mariam more and more disconcertedly out of the corner of her eye.

An old stray cat took to following them around and when they went in he would lay outside their door sometimes all night. He would disappear for a few days and then turn up at the kitchen window and they would make a circle place in the frost there for his moon face to stare in. Then one morning Phoebe went downstairs and almost stumbled over him lying dead on the front steps with a car aerial jammed halfway up his ass. She numbly chipped away with her boot at the ice freezing him to the steps and pushed him over the side. When she came back the body was gone. But when she got to their door she recognized laying there the aerial sticky with blood. Perhaps the hallway was just quieter in winter, but now it seemed listening quiet.

Mariam, when she was told, shook her head and cursed under her breath. That was all.

Phoebe had seen in the older woman's eyes flickers of the same pain that came to the surface when she told her horror stories. Phoebe had expected her to be outraged at least. Wearing cowboy boots be a crazy cowboy shoot up the building especially the sisters. But all that Mariam did was hold her and cradle her wet face and for just a little bit she lost herself in Mariam, becoming aware of the firm flesh which was almost hard on her upper arms and grew softest down around the breasts and she felt herself in one of Mariam's history stories and that was the closest they'd ever been. But the anger came back when she insisted to Mariam that they start confronting the people in their building—especially the sisters—and Mariam reacted like she really had suggested shooting up the building. When she insisted Mariam set her face and said less and less and finally grew silent — big butch

immovable-black matriarch lie cohabited and gave birth to so much chickenshit, to Phoebe's way of thinking. She wanted to say so, but

already Mariam sat facing the window.

Phoebe remembered the massages. How when there had been warm times, that was the core. How Mariam's hands took her farther and farther out like a string unwinding from the top of her head working her until finally she was a big chunk of dough under Mariam's great big hands molding her into any shape she desired and back out again and rolling her over and over and over spinning her tossing her in the air squeezing sweet dream as light as the airhole in a biscuit. Mariam's hands massaging were simply the hands of a mother working on the family supper.

Mariam sitting back in her robe and her yellow, green, red, purple, patterned headrag, her Jamaican headrag, talking on the

phone to her brother.

"I'm the only daughter," Mariam said, "when somebody gets sick

I have to go home."

Her first night in an apartment by herself, Phoebe heard the sounds very clearly. The footsteps of neighbor boys just inside the door, women's voices whispering in fear, the scratching of the cat at the window. For one hour just before the sun rose, she slept.

The next morning when she opened the door, three sisters were standing in front of 219; they hushed their conversations as she stood locking the door, fumbling a little because their fishhook eyes caught at her skin. She walked away without looking at them.

—"Ummmmm, her girlfriend left her you know, saw her

moving out yesterday."

—"She be on the lookout for another one, Marcy you better watch out."

—"Huh, I ain't worried. I got my man, he'll stomp that little scrawny ass scandalous he catch her eye on me."

—"Well me, I carry a blade..."

She would not run she would not let them see that, but if she had run she would not have heard what she heard. They were talking to her as sure as her mother had, as sure as her grandmother when they went about the kitchen putting things back in their proper place again after dinner, after company, not looking her way often but with a steady stream of good advice and gossip about poetic justice; calling to her as she ran out the door to school telling her to avoid so-and-so and she better not do such-and-such, for her own good.

A week later when she heard Mariam's heavy boot on the hallway she knew that all of the other women heard it too and was ashamed. A goddamned lumberjack; no wonder they were scared. Mariam's key turned in the lock and she did not even look towards the door. A week after the first day of spring, she moved into her own place.

She looks at her own reflection in the door; slender, dark and the 'you put me in mind of my niece' of an elder sister who lives in her new building. There are elder brothers and sisters and some younger sisters with children in the new building and everyone has told a story and had it listened to carefully by the others. They are a family. Phoebe has told a story...

"Where's your man today?" a grey-haired brother asks her jestfully. "I don't have one," she replies.

The simple, unsmiling reply does not lend itself to another joke and so the brother nods to himself and a minute later smiles quietly.

...but Mariam has never visited her there.

She opens the door to get a lungful of smoked autumn air from the university campus, and stands there awhile watching the people. College students and the black children from the community that is surrounding gradually seeping color onto the fringes of the academic pale green. Mariam often speaks of this area years ago when you didn't even see black street cleaners here.

She turns to pace the floor again, but instead walks to the office to ask Mariam to watch the store. She hurries out intending to get a quick breath of air. She walks the rest of the afternoon thinking that if she had not met Mariam things might be much simpler, however to love Mariam is to be unable to lie.

Someone comes behind her and puts their arm around her shoulder. It is Mariam.

"I closed early," she says, not moving her arm. Phoebe looks about, it is a busy sidewalk, late afternoon classes are letting out, dinner is beginning in the student dining hall.

Right away she hears snickering, they are young brothers around nine and ten having passed going the opposite direction now doing a leprechaun dance and poking each other laughing. A very proper white professor carrying a briefcase goes by, looking down his nose at them, but he would probably do that anyway, they both know. Everyone is either looking at them or making it a point not to. Phoebe's anger subsides a bit as she genuinely wonders how Mariam has managed all these years. She wonders if her walk has always been

steady like this, like a graceful, proud lumberjack, even when children carefreely tossed epithets at her so often that sometimes they slipped into her own mind in place of her name, so that when she got up and looked into the mirror on Monday morning she would think of the worst name she had been called that weekend.

-"Why do you put on an act?"

-"What act?"

—"Dressing like a damn gangster or a cowboy...walking like you John Wayne."

—"That's the way Iam, baby. I remember when I first bought this coat..."

—"No." Mariam would edge her way into a story and never answer. It was scary, demanding things of Mariam, it seemed nearly disrespectful to someone who had taught you so much, but only Mariam could help her to clear her mind of everything the sisters said — the mother, the grandmother, the aunt, the daughter — only Mariam was closer to her now.

—"Mariam no. I've seen people severed..." She is trying to place together the words that explain how there are millions of people in the world but they are of the chosen few. And alienation is unhealthy.

—"I got my eye on you all the time, Phoebe. I'm watching what

you do. I really am."

She smiles an assurance then, and will say no more and does not look at Phoebe, only keeps her arm tightly around her shoulder. "Okay." Mariam has listened to every word she ever said, every story she has ever told too; even the ideas of the white boys at the gay rallies, so long as they came through Phoebe's mouth. Mariam is listening. Okay. The anger at her friend that has been straining for an entire summer now loosens, leaving a fine dull ache in every single muscle in her body...She takes a deep breath and without thinking about it, puts her arm around Mariam. It is nice. The warmth of her flesh is either coming through the big coat or has over the years and stories become meshed with it. It is a worn, smooth old skin, sweet to her fingers. Phoebe thinks about nothing else for awhile. Then she considers what they are doing now, walking directly to her new home — two women in the situation of lovers, a simple guerrilla action.

She strokes Mariam's arm gently, almost lingeringly as if they sat already in her apartment with no one looking but two women in a mirror. The thought of the sisters is painful, but worrying about that brings exhaustion and costs precious things. They are nearly home.

There are distinct voices and words that she will hear inside her

head for weeks to come and ringing out constantly like the rhyme in a poem is the class 'bulldyke' playing on itself `bulldagger.' She realizes that she is biting her lip...someone tall and muscular, larger than Mariam, is walking on her other side, pressing against her, stepping on her heel but she does not turn her head and finally he falls away behind laughing at the top of his voice...and she is afraid that her fingernails might be tearing through Mariam's tough coat-skin, she is clutching so hard.

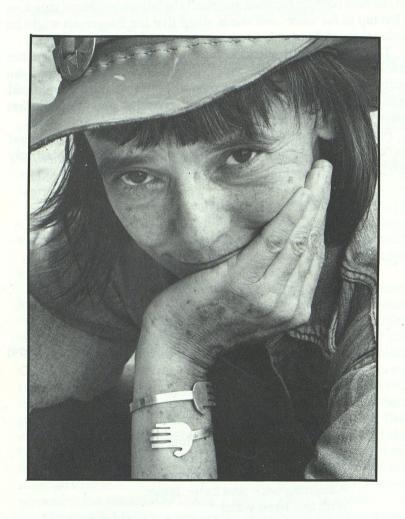
There are distant silences, mostly in the eyes of women her mother's age. There are the voices of children that most times she would not even hear. She looks over at Mariam's hard profile and feeling her eyes the woman turns and gives her a gentle look that nearly warms her into a smile. Mariam is here. Again and again.

For a few moments, Phoebe holds the eyes of a young girl of about ten, not fearful eyes, nor angry nor scornful, instead eyes that simply search their faces

& & &

Barbara Deming (#8, 1979)

Our love, like the new moon,
Lies at last within the old moon's arms
And grows again.
Lone night after night we had been
Without its light — this grace withdrawn.
Shaken with tears, we spoke our loss —
Admitting what was bitter, bitter.
With this burst water
Love was born again.
Again I swoon upon your mothering breast,
Again the white crescent of your body
And my body are joined, and blessed.



Kady Van Deurs photo by Diana Davies (#7, 1978)

Unit Number 18

"What if someone sticks their big toe in it?" "This is the last clean sheet we'll just have to take a chance."

This was also the last unit we had to clean for the day. I work with Alora at the Seaweed Motel. It is just off the highway on the outer edges of San Francisco. Alora and I work pretty well as maids together except she likes to clean with ammonia and I prefer Pinesol and she likes to tune into the soap operas on tv and I like going through people's closets and drawers — when they aren't there of course. Alora cleans the rooms while I clean the bathrooms. She runs a dust mop over the floor and after I help her make the bed she sits on it and watches her favorite soap. I slap a wet towel over the bathroom. Then to make it seem sparkly clean I slip a strip of paper over the toilet seat that says something about it being sanitary and then I put another large square paper on the shower floor so people won't slip when they shower.

One very foggy morning Alora and I pushed our carts through the courtyard to unit 18 at the far end of the motel. This caused some late sleepers to curse at us because our carts were so noisy. The people who checked out of 18 had one hell of a time the night before. The bed was in pieces wine bottles were in every corner — potato chips crunched under our feet. The towels were gone except for one dripping wet washcloth left in the shower, next to the square paper. We both moaned. Alora turned the tv on. I turned it off.

"Gawd Alora you are beginning to sound like those damn soaps."

"I am not! What's wrong with you anyway?"

"You know what you told me the other day about your sister who's having an affair with that married doctor whose wife is going to kill herself because she has a crippled dog?"

"It's true!" Alora shouted.

I said, "Alora you told me you don't have any sisters."

"And what about you telling me you met the queen of Greece

when there's no such person!?"

Hey, a voice behind us said, "the tenants are complaining." The manager stood at the door with egg stuck in his beard. "I don't mind

you talking but keep it down a little." He left and Alora and I didn't speak — for the rest of the day we only said what we needed to.

I pouted and wished I worked with another lesbian instead of Alora whose boyfriend could only fix cars and talk about baseball. I never cleaned so thoroughly. I'd ram my hand into a rubber glove and scrub the living hell out of those bathrooms.

We were near the manager's unit. He was banging pots and pans and talking loudly to someone on the phone, "— no I said we do not take cats and a deposit must be paid for the dog—umm yeah yeah—"

"Do you wanna do one more unit then break for lunch?" I asked Alora but looked at the cart I was pushing. "Tsk ok." She mumbled something else I couldn't hear.

I knocked twice on the door, "Maid service!" The door opened slowly. Two women stood, one on either side of the room. One with her fists pushed into her hips — hips that a leather belt was wrapped around with a long knife hanging from it. The other woman stood holding the door, an army jacket on her thick arms. Our eyes darted back and forth like they were dancing on strobe lights. A radio on the desk was playing a song called you light up my life. The strong aroma of fish frying in the manager's unit overwhelmed me. I held the rubbertipped finger of my glove to my mouth and cleared my throat, "Would you like us to clean your room?" "It's alright," the woman in the army jacket said. "We're checking out in a few minutes.

Alora pulled on my arm so we went and sat in the courtyard with our lunches. Alora babbled on about how she was sorry and she sure hoped I was too and then she talked about what she was going to feed whatsizname for dinner while I watched the clouds drift by and the seagulls dipping through the air and hummed you light up my life. "Aren't you gonna eat?" Alora asked "No you can have it if you want." So she ate my cheese sandwich and apple. The two women checked out and drove away in a sports car with Texas license plates. For the next few weeks I not only hummed the same song over and over I thought incessantly about the two women and wondered what they did in Texas. Maybe they're cattle rustlers or teachers. Do they live in the middle of nowhere with each other and prairie dogs and cactus? Why did they come to San Francisco? Maybe they found an apartment and are living here now. So I went to every place I could think of that gay women would go to. I remembered every feature on their faces and saw a great number of women who could almost have passed for them.

Alora was really grating on my nerves. She stopped watching the soaps and watched the game shows instead so everytime we'd get our paychecks she'd screech and throw her arms up like she'd just won a new car.

Then one day the sports car with the Texas plates appeared next to unit 18. I rushed Alora up as fast as I could and told her lies to stop her from turning the tv on. "The manager is going to find someone else if we don't straighten up." We were cleaning the unit next to 18 when I heard their voices — first low and angry then louder and louder, "You can get twenty fuckin years for possession—You fuckin bitch stay off my ass—"

Alora looked disgusted and banged on the door, 'Come back later!" an angry voice shouted. "Please keep your voices down," Alora said like she was talking to a room full of children, "You're disturbing the other tenants." One of the women stomped out and pounded down the street. The other woman said to Alora, "Shit then I'm leavin too!" and she tore off in another direction. "Okay we'll clean the room now." Alora sang like nothing happened.

I checked the knife left on the desk. It could have sliced a piece of hair into four strands. I picked through the open suitcase, four work shirts, two pairs of overalls, a carton of Camels, a map of California—"You wanna help me make this bed?" I pulled myself away.

One pillow lay on the floor the other had two dents on it where I was sure both their heads lay before the fight. I wanted to help them. They weren't cattle rustlers at all but big time dealers probably part of the Texas connection; or maybe one of them had a single joint and the other freaked because they are both elementary school teachers on vacation. I couldn't bear to leave the motel without letting them know I was after all "concerned" about them. So when I cleaned their bathroom I wrote on the strip of paper left around the toilet seat, "Please see note in shower" then on the square paper left in the shower I wrote — "All types of help given — call Linda the maid." I left not only my phone number but my address then rushed back later and wrote careful instructions on how to get to my apartment. Later that night I waited for a phone call then as I began to tire and the night slowed down I started feeling ridiculous. I blushed at the thought of ever facing them again. My god they must think I'm nuts. I stared down at the phone — if it rang at that moment I would have passed out from shock. I took the receiver off the hook. The next morning I called in sick. Everything seemed as usual.

Alora was back to watching the soap opera. I played hopscotch with two kids from one of the units and they thought it was very

funny watching an overweight middle-aged woman hopscotching. Alora and I refused to clean a room that had a large growly german shepherd guarding the door. Alora told me at some point she was leaving. She and her boyfriend were getting married and going to move to god knows where. When we got to unit 18 I went right to the bathroom and cleaned it quickly. The two women had moved out and a new tenant was sitting on the bed watching us clean.

After lunch the manager brought the maid that would take Alora's place. "This is Sarah." "Didn't I meet you in that little bar on mission street?" I asked her excitedly. "Yeah I thought you looked familiar." Sarah wore two earrings in one ear and none in the other. She was my size and had very short hair that curled tightly on her head. We checked each other out completely while we spoke.

Alora decided to leave early. Before she left she said "Oh by the way you know those people in unit 18? They left a note for you."

"WHAT!" I was nearly on top of her. "Where is it?"

"Oh I didn't keep it I threw it away."

"Well shit what did it say?"

"Tsk oh I don't know somethin like thank you and ah we got our shit together and what looked like a phone number or address or something."

"Why didn't you save it for me?!" She looked at me like I was

crazy and left.

Sarah and I have been working together for some time now. She hates to and loves snooping through people's things as much as I do furthermore we are both waiting for the two women from Texas to come back.

A Meeting Of The Sapphic Daughters

Lettie and Patrice almost arrived at their small apartment the same time that evening as they rushed home from classes. They quickly ate an instant dinner of hot dogs and canned baked beans, bathed, and dressed. By seven p.m., both were ready to leave for the meeting of the

Sapphic Daughters.

Patrice was more excited about the occasion than Lettie mainly because, initially, it had all been her idea. Lettie had entertained other thoughts for this Friday night, which did not include being with what she was certain would be a gathering of all-white Sapphic Sisters. But Patrice, whom Lettie sometimes affectionately dubbed her Oriole Cookie, had a habit of wanting to attend events for which she, Lettie, had no heart. Like the Gurdjieff lecture and Bartok concert last week at Jefferson University, where Patrice was working on her doctorate in American literature with the aid of a fellowship. Esoteric lectures and concerts were all a part of Patrice, who was a growth product of the fifties. She was one of the first to integrate the schools in Alabama, and later became a recipient of the rush handout scholarships awarded to black students by one of the private, predominantly white, women's colleges in New England — scholarships awarded to invite Federal monies. Patrice had been around more whites than blacks. Her whole life's itinerary had been a journey through a nonidentifiable, cultureless milieu. During this time, she was one of the lucky ones who had few problems, for her physical makeup of a light complexion, proportioned features, and curly sandy hair did not cause much of a panic among those white students who feared only the color of blackness.

With Lettie it was different, for she halfway straddled another generation. Lettie had attended all-black public schools in Washington, D.C., and completed her college work at Howard University, closing her circle of blackness. Even now the pattern had not been too severed, since she taught political science at a community college in a predominantly black neighborhood. The college had a smattering of white students and a top-heavy frosting of white administrators. She knew the whites disliked her, for she made them uncomfortable with her candid outspokenness.

Even her appearance seemed a threat to them. She wore her mixed gray Afro closely cut to the shape of her round head. The deep, rich, ebony darkness of her skin reflected the mystery of her long-lost ancestors in the flowing ancestral heritage of her existence. Her dark flashing eyes could change from softness to a cutting penetration when adversely confronted. She was cynical; she knew the world, people—especially white people. About them, she would bitterly warn Patrice: I don't care how friendly some of them are, when push comes to shove, they're white first!

"You've tied that headpiece fifty times," Patrice snapped impa-

tiently, watching her in front of the bureau mirror.

"Mind's someplace else—" Lettie replied shortly, now smoothing the folds of her long African dress.

"What's there to think about? We're just going to a meeting to hear Trollope Gaffney. The literature passed out at the college's Women's Center stated that *all* lesbians were welcome to attend."

"Uh-huh. But I'm just wondering how many black lesbians will be there besides us?"

Patrice garnered part of the mirror to apply lipstick. "It would be nice to find out, wouldn't it?"

"How can we when they're in the closets? " Lettie retorted.

"Well—so are we!" Patrice exclaimed in exasperation, turning to face her. "Have we come out to our colleagues, friends—students?"

"For what? To become ostracized? It's bad enough being looked upon as lepers by whites, let alone blacks. You know how blacks feel about—bulldaggers." Lettie spat out the epithet deliberately.

Patrice shuddered. "I hate that word —"

"So do I. But that's what our people call us," Lettie said softly. Suddenly a smile broke across her face, like sun obscuring a cloud, as she took in Patrice's shapely form outlined in a sheer summer dress the color of violets. "You look beautiful —"

"And you look beautifully militant!" Patrice laughed admiringly. "I'm letting them know in *front* how I stand."

"C'mon, Angela Davis," Patrice teased, "let's go. The meeting starts at eight."

II

The meeting place of the Sapphic Daughters was on the second floor above a curio shop in a shabby brick building near a battery of dilapidated warehouses. A large, husky woman with a hostile face, dressed in faded denims stood guard at the door, blocking their entrance.

Lettie purposely lingered behind Patrice, fighting off her natural inclination to simply ignore the woman and brush past her. She heard Patrice ask with her nicest Wellesley demeanor: "Is this where Trollope Gaffney is scheduled to speak?"

The woman gave Patrice a long hard silent stare. Lettie smirked, thinking she was probably wondering if she were a nigger, and if so, where did she get that way of speaking.

"Yeah —" the guard finally grunted.

Deciding that there had been enough time spent on social graces, Lettie took Patrice's arm and forthrightly guided her past the door block. Immediately upon their entrance, they were washed by a shoal of white faces gazing at them from behind cold masks.

The meeting hall was an elongated, poorly lighted room bordering on bareness. A makeshift platform was at the front with three straight-backed chairs, a small table with copies of Trollope Gaffney's latest book, and a scratched-up podium. Decorating the wall behind was a large cardboard sign reading SAPPHIC DAUGHTERS with the interlocking Sapphic symbol beneath. Metal folding chairs had been placed in the center of the room. Along the right wall were two card tables pushed together, covered with white

paper cloths for serving refreshments. A large tin tub housed chunks of ice-sheltered beer.

Some of the women were seated, while others milled around in clover group clusters. "Br-r-r, I can feel the chill already," Lettie murmured, looking around.

"Don t be so negative. You just got here. Let's sit in the back row."
"No, indeedy! I've had enough back seat sitting in my lifetime!"
Lettie retorted. "Front and center—"

The women seated in the fourth row they entered shifted their legs slightly to let them in. One attempted a weak smile. "I don't see one of us here — " Lettie observed.

"Sh-h-h—" Patrice hushed her. "I think they're getting ready to start." Three pants-clad women strode stiffly down the aisle to the platform, feet grinding hard on the wooden floor. "That's Trollope Gaffney—" Patrice whispered excitedly, "in the center."

"How could I miss her?" Lettie retorted sarcastically, watching the little group's important accession to the stand. "She wears the same kind of clothes all the time." Trollope Gaffney was a tall broomstick-formed woman with a hard brittle face reflecting her forties. She was dressed in her usual attire as seen in the newspapers and on the covers of her books: tight sequined brown pants, braided shirt with a gold women's pendant embroidered on the breast pocket, and a beret. The two women flanking her were flushed with pleasure and excitement. One was young with a cupid face dotted with two splotches of rouge, and had long brown hair. The other was older, tall as Trollope and had a surly, self-important air about her.

Trollope Gaffney sat down first, cocking one leg halfway over the other, then the girl followed. The third woman stationed herself behind the podium, scowling darkly at the women who had not

broken their cloistered groups to be seated.

"Please take your seats —" the woman commanded. "We want to start on time."

The groups obediently broke up as the women scattered to find empty chairs. Then the mistress of ceremony called the meeting of Sapphic Daughters to order. Before starting the program, she wanted to remind them about next Friday's potluck supper at someone named Cynthia's house; called for more volunteers to get the Sapphic Daughters' magazine out; and told them that dues had to be paid by the end of the month. Then turning to the girl behind her, she said proudly: "To begin our program, Wendy is going to read us her latest poem which is dedicated to Trollope Gaffney."

There was a smattering of light applause and a barely audible groan from the back. Wendy stood up nervously, taking a sheaf of papers from her bag. In a young, breathy intonation, she began a rapturous reading of her poem:

She is what I love
She with her soft beauty
who can delight me to ecstasy
Take! me away on a cloud of
Woman-an-ly lo-o-ve

"Sounds like the shit I used to write in junior high school," Lettie murmured.

Patrice gave her a warning glance, thankful that the seats directly beside them them weren't occupied. Lettie was pragmatic, a realist. Patrice had found this out on their first meeting when they had served together on a Black Feminist panel. They had talked after the discus-

sion, talked into the following months, and talked until they discovered each other and how they felt.

When the girl sat down, there was another polite succession of applause. The mistress of ceremony told Wendy her poem was beautiful, so tender, full of love, like only women can have for each other. Afterwards, she began reading from a stack of publicity releases to introduce the guest speaker for the evening, Trollope Gaffney.

"...one of our foremost lesbian/feminist writers. A leader, fighter—"

When she finally finished, the hall resounded with loud, appreciate hand-claps for Trollope Gaffney. When Trollope got up, the room was instilled with attentive, respectful silence.

Trollope Gaffney had a high-pitched voice that derided her aggressive, bold, mannish appearance. She was self-assured and spoke without notes, having done this so many times before. Her talk was about the gay liberation movement, where it stood now and projections of how it would be in the future. She envisioned a world community of lesbians. "We have to assert ourselves — build. Identify ourselves to each other — this great army of lesbian women, because we are all sisters-s-s-. We are all one in the beauty of Sapphic love-e-e!"

Later when she finished, the hall's walls rocked with cheers as the women stood up. The Sapphic Sisters began crowding the platform to enclose Trollope Gaffney in a web of reverence. The young poet Wendy began selling Trollope's book as the purchasers waited patiently for autographed copies. A record player was turned on, and the nasal voices of a lesbian group singing sad ballads of women in love with women saturated the hall in a plaintive, hollow sound.

"You want a beer?" Patrice asked, let down by the cynical look naked on Lettie's face.

"Now, what was all of that speech about?"

"About love and building a world community of lesbians," Patrice answered, as they approached the refreshment table.

"Who needs one? If I'm going to build a separate community of

any kind, it'll be a black one!"

"How much is the beer?" Patrice asked the chubby girl with yellow bangs behind the table.

"Seventy-five cents for a beer, and fifty cents for a sandwich. We

got baloney, cheese, tuna fish — "

"Wham!" Lettie breathed. "They must be already starting to finance that lesbian community."

"Two beers, please — " Patrice ordered, searching her purse.

The woman on the platform who had taken charge of the program came toward them in long, swaggering strides. "I'm J.L., president of the Sapphic Daughters." Her eyes were a sharp, glittering steel blue, like a frosty clear winter's sky. She stood back on her legs, hands hooked over her belt, face closed.

"I'm Patrice and this is Lettie —" Patrice smiled, while Lettie eyed her cautiously.

"You live around here?" J.L. asked.

"Yes—" Lettie said quickly, taking the can of beer Patrice offered to her. She had played this scene years ago, many times before, going to places where colored, Negroes, niggers weren't wanted. J.L.'s question was a familiar conversation piece that dripped with subtle warning. Blacks who "lived around here" knew better than to go to places where they were not wanted.

"Hi!" Now the girl who had read her poetry came up to stand

beside Lettie. "I'm Wendy —"

"Yes, we know — the poet," Patrice said. "This is Lettie and I'm Patrice." Wendy stuck out an eager hand. "We've never had any black lesbians here before — "

"Oh?" Lettie said icily, raising the beer can to her mouth.

"We meet every other Friday. Sometimes we have rap sessions, consciousness-raising groups, and dances — "

"Do you people have any kind of an organization?" J.L. questioned, taking a cigarette from a crumpled pack in her shirt pocket.

"Frankly, we don't know any black lesbians," Patrice said,

frowning.

"Or, if we do, they haven't told us," Lettie added, smiling venom.

"Do you know any?" Patrice said to J.L. She swallowed her beer hurriedly. This was a habit with her, to drink beer quickly before it got too warm and tasted like glue.

"Naw — " J.L. squinted over the cigarette smoke.

Suddenly out of a murky past, Patrice was reminded of the rednecked crackers in Alabama. Revulsion shivered her spine. After all the transplanted years, she was surprised that she could still remember. Painful memories are never easy to forget, like being hurt in love.

Women began drifting over to the table. A rock group record had replaced the melancholy singers, and a few couples had started to dance. Beer cans were opened, and sizzling, popping sounds interspersed with laughter.

"What brought you here tonight?" J.L. went on persistently.

"A couple of things. Primarily, we wanted to hear Trollope Gaffney. I have assigned some of her writings to my students — "Lettie replied, feeling anger warm inside her. Maybe what really brought her here was the devil to knock hell out of the bitch.

"And we wanted to meet others like ourselves —" Patrice added,

gently.

Wendy edged closer to Lettie, gazing approvingly at her. "That's a lovely African dress — " $\,$

"Like yourselves?" The words were thrown like acid by J.L.

You goddamn racist! Lettie thought, as the beer churned sourly in her stomach. Beer and anger don't mix. White racists and black militants don't mix, and white lesbians and black lesbians are white and black people first, instilled with personal backgrounds of distrust and hostilities.

Seeing the smoldering fire in Lettie's eyes, J.L. backed away, putting out the cigarette in an ashtray on the edge of the table. "Uh—well—you see, this is a kind of *private* organization." She conjured up a weak grin which became a clown's grimace. "We meet at each other's houses sometimes and we are all—er—friends."

"Here comes Trollope — " Wendy interrupted.

Trollope joined them, still surrounded by her network of admirers. "I'm thirsty!" she giggled shrilly.

Someone quickly produced a can of beer for her. Over the can, her

eyes glistened at Patrice and Lettie. "And who are you two?"

Patrice repeated the introductions, watching Wendy openly gazing at Lettie from beneath heavily lidded speculative eyes. For a flashing moment, jealousy singed her. *Yes, white girl, she's good in bed to me.* Angrily she finished her beer, throwing the can in a wastebasket.

"We have your last book —" Lettie told Trollope.

"How nice. What did you think of it?"

Patrice held her breath, waiting for Lettie's reply. She knew from long ago how Lettie could raise her husky voice and let it all come out like thunder and lightning in a brass band. Only this time, Lettie was constrained.

"The section on political freedom for women was well-taken, but there doesn't seem to be anything in any of the lesbian literature on the lesbian movement addressing itself to helping the black lesbian to become free of racism—especially *inside* the lesbian community."

Trollope looked puzzled at first, then flustered.

"Will there be freedom from racism in your lesbian world community?" Lettie went on pointedly.

"Of course — " Trollope answered stiffly, looking over and

beyond them.

"I had a black lover once — " Wendy blurted out.

J.L. shot her a mean look.

"It's easy to be liberal between the sheets — " Lettie said too sweetly.

Trollope let out a squeal. "There's Tommie! I haven't seen her in ages!" Moving away, she smiled broadly. "Nice meeting you — Patrice and Lettie."

J.L. grabbed Wendy's hand — "C'mon — let's dance."

Wendy waved back to them as she let J.L. lead her to the dancing

circle. "Come again!"

"Got enough?" Lettie asked deliberately putting her half-finished beer can on the table. She hated beer.

"Uh-huh!"

"Then — let's go."

They left and no one said goodbye.

In the bed, Lettie asked sleepily: "Now, has your curiosity been satisfied about the Sapphic Daughters, my little Oriole Cookie?"

"Umph!" Patrice grunted tiredly. "It was like crashing the D.A.R.—"
"Maybe someday, we might find that silent legion of black lesbians. But until then—"

"We stay in the closet," Patrice mumbled, moving closer to her. "It would be nice to know — others."

"Perhaps we do. And possibly one of these days, they'll let us know." Lettie said. "Let's go to sleep. You never know what tomorrow will bring."

[&]quot;A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters" was published in Ann Allen Shockley's book of short stories, *The Black and White of It* (Naiad Press, 1987). This is the way it appeared in *SW* #9.

In America They Call Us Dykes: notes on the etymology and usage of "dyke"

The women-loving women in America were called dykes and some liked it and some did not...

Judy Grahn, from "A History of Lesbianism"

Lesbians have long been the object of vicious "name-calling" designed to intimidate us into silence and invisibility. *Dyke* is one of the words that has been negatively and violently flung at us for more than a half century. In the Lesbian/Feminist 1970s, we broke the silence on this tabooed word, reclaiming it for ourselves, assigning to it positive, political values. The reclamation of *dyke* has also sparked an historical/

etymological search for its origins.

Although dyke is used in England, lesbian, Sapphist and butch have been traditional there (Partridge 1968). In the United States, dyke is a cross-cultural term found in both Anglo-American and African-American slang. In African-American slang, dyke, as it stands alone, does not seem to have been in widespread use as of 1970, but more commonly appeared in combination with bull to form bull-dyke, signifying an "aggressive female homosexual," bull-dagger, boondagger, and bull-diker being variations. Bull was/is used in Black culture to indicate Lesbian (Major 1970; Berry 1972).*

The term *dike* or *dyke* had probably been around for some time before the 1930s-1940s when it was first documented in slang dictionaries. Slang terms often originate among special groups, some of which are "outcasts" of mainstream society whose members feel alienated from the values of the dominant culture. Such groupings may be based on age, race, ethnic, or class background. Among such groups have been the younger generation, Blacks, hoboes, criminals, street people, artists and writers, gays and Lesbians. The creation of new words and new definitions for old words serves a social and political purpose: it may constitute an act of power and rebellion for

^{*} *Bull* was a tabooed word circa early twentieth century, not be used in mixed company, signifying "the male of the species." Less offensive terms like "top cow" were often substituted. *Bull bitch* was a rural term applied to "masculine" women (Wentworth, 1944; Wentworth and Flexner, 1975).

those who feel and are powerless; or it may provide a sense of validation and identity denied by the dominant culture, thus becoming a source of social/cultural cohesion and pride — a language of one's own. A new language helps to articulate a new society. Some slang terms may even be adopted by the dominant culture, eventually becoming "Standard English," or they may fall into disuse or remain the linguistic property of the special group. Slang terms may be collected and listed in published lexicons, dictionaries, and thesauri. Definitions may change with time. These are slow, complicated evolutions influenced by social, economic, political and intellectual ideas and events in the dominant culture and among those outcast groups.

The earliest known references using dyke or dike (an earlier? spelling no longer in wide usage today) to describe "masculine" Lesbians, or Lesbians generally, date to circa 1920s-1930s, indicating at least a half century of usage.* Partridge indicates that dike denotes a "female homosexual" and that the term comes from the combination bull-dike (Partridge 1968), which was used among Black people as early as circa 1920s-1930s (AC/DC Blues 1977). Godfrey Irwin, a compiler of tramp and underworld slang, likewise supports this definition of bull-dike in a letter to Partridge dated September 18, 1937. During the thirties, bull-dike was also being used among prison inmates at Sing Sing to indicate a woman who practiced oral sex on men (Haragan 1935, as quoted by Partridge 1968). It is interesting that the homosexual bull-dike and the heterosexual bull-dike were both associated with so-called "unnatural" and socially unapproved sexual behaviors. This is one of many connections existing between homosexual slang, heterosexual slang, and woman-hating slang.** By the 1940s we find dike or dyke listed in slang dictionaries to indicate "masculine woman," being synonymous with other words signifying "Lesbian" (Berrey & Van Den Bark 1942, 1947).***

In the pre-liberation forties, fifties and sixties, "Lesbian slang" was often role-related. *Dyke/dike* and *butch* were used to signify "masculine" Lesbians who wore "men's clothing" (Stanley, June 24, 1977; Aldrich 1955:54). "Feminine" Lesbians were *femmes* or *fluffs* (*Vice Versa* I:6, November 1947). Among Midwest Black Lesbians the

** See "Sexist Slang and the Gay Community: Are You One, Too? by Julia

(Stanley) Penelope and Susan W. Robbins.

^{*} Earler, at the turn of the century, *dyke* was one of many slang terms denoting the vulva (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904:338).

^{***} Currently, there are several theories concerning the etymology of dyke or dike, which are threaded together by the androgynous concept of the "manlywoman."

words *stud* and *fish* were used respectively (Sawyer 1965). Special terms indicating varying degrees of "mannishness" were formed by adding prefixes, for example: *bull-dike*, *diesel dyke*, *stompin' diesel dyke*.* As Lesbian linguist Julia Stanley indicates, *dyke* in our own time, the Lesbian/Feminist seventies, has undergone a change in meaning from a once pejorative term to a politically charged definition. This has occurred within the liberation movements of Lesbians and gays. "To be a dyke or a faggot," writes Julia, "refers to one's political identity as a gay activist ... but redefining old terms that have been pejoratives for so long is not an easy process, nor is it something that takes place overnight. Among women, new definitions are being made among usages of old terms. As we redefine the old pejorative labels making them our own, what we choose to call ourselves also takes on political meaning, defining one's political position" (Stanley 1974:390-391).

The personal is political. The personal is also historical. On many levels we Lesbians today have experienced historical/political transformations. Sometimes it is possible to recall an exact time and place where transformations occurred. Although I don't ever recall having used the word *dyke* in the old pejorative sense, I do remember when I first began using dyke in a liberated sense. It was late 1973; I had just come out via the Lesbian/Feminist Movement. During a conversation with an older Lesbian friend who had come out years earlier without the aid of a movement, I referred to the two of us as dykes. Her reaction was equivalent to "Hey, wait a minute! Watch ver mouth!" as if I had uttered some terrible obscenity. She then proceeded to enlighten me as to the older, negative meaning. But, I said I don't see it that way at all. To me dyke is positive; it means a strong, independent Lesbian who can take care of herself. As I continued with the movement, dyke took on even stronger political implications than "activist." It signified woman-identified culture, identity, pride and strength women, alone and together, who live consciously and deliberately autonomous lives, no longer seeking definitions or approvals according to male values. Soon my older friend also began identifying positively with the word dyke.

Exercising this new power of self-definition, we now have a variety of names and definitions with which to describe our many political selves. Our Lesbian lifestyle is very diverse, and our use of language and choice of names and definitions reflect our many cultural, racial, ethnic, class, regional and political backgrounds, as

^{*} Lesbian poet Judy Grahn theorizes that bull-dike derives from the Celtic warrior queen, Boudica, who fought the Romans in 61 A.D. (Grahn 1984: Ch.6)

well as our generational perspectives. Today the straight world continues to use *dyke* in the old pejorative sense. There are a number of Lesbians who do also. These Lesbians may not have been exposed to the current movement, or, being concerned with their status and survival in the straight world, they may reject the term as harmful. There is also a segment of the Lesbian population which grew up, came out, and participated in the earlier Lesbian culture before 1970 who retain the negative definition they have always known. So the definition of *dyke* has changed only for *some* Lesbians, not for all.

There are some questions to be wondered about. If *dyke* has different definitions today, is it possible that there were different definitions in earlier times? Did all Lesbians before the 1970s generally define *dyke* negatively? Was it such a distasteful term, or were there those Lesbians who felt a sense of pride at being labeled *dyke*? What did it mean to them? Where did the American tradition of the

"mannish" Lesbian as dike/dyke come from?

Poet Elsa Gidlow raises the possibility that the word dyke may have had its origins in the Greek word dike, that is Athene, the "manlywoman" who is the principle of total order (Stanley, June 24, 1977). There is also the related Flexner and Wentworth (1975) hypothesis that dike probably came from hermaphrodite, the -dite being "clipped" off and later evolving into dike, due to a regional (Coney Island??) mispronunciation. Cordova adds support to this hypothesis when she reports conversations with older Lesbians who indicate the folk belief that the root word of dyke was once hermaphrodite, with its origins in the Greek myth of Hermes and Aphrodite who join to create the androgynous creature (Cordova 1974:22). Of the -dite to dike theory, Julia Stanley comments: "For reasons of my own, I've never bought the -dite to dike explanation, primarily because /t/ hardly ever becomes /k/ in natural languages. I'm not saying it's impossible, especially in an unstressed syllable, where an alveolar might be heard as a velar, just that it's unlikely" (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

My own recent research has turned up an interesting, but never before cited, usage of *dike* dating from late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, representing another possible, and perhaps more viable, origin, based in the social customs of the people rather than in classical allusion. Both Schele de Vere (1871) and Clapin (1902) in their compilations of Americanisms indicate *dike* as denoting a man in full dress, or merely the set of male clothing itself. Schele de Vere says this is a "peculiar American cant term, as yet unexplained." Clapin, however, indicates that *dike* likely resulted from the corrup-

tion of the Old English dight (Anglo-Saxon origin). Dight meant to dress, clothe; to adorn, deck oneself (Johnson, 2nd ed., 1827). In listing dike, Mathews (1951) indicates a possible connection between dight and the English dialect dick, both of which meant "to deck or adorn." By 1856 dight was cited by Hall as being nearly obsolete in the United States, while diked and diked out were in use. The word dike probably came to America with the English at the time of colonization, but once in America other usages may have developed. Both Clapin and Schele de Vere indicate that dike was not only used as a verb, but also as a noun to describe a person of either sex who was all dressed up. However, dike as a person or as a set of clothing most often referred to the male sex.

There is growing evidence that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a number of women in both the United States and Europe were adopting male attire, both permanently and on occasion. Katz has called some of these women "Passing Women" (Katz 1976: Ch.3). These women dressed, lived, voted, worked—literally "passed" — as men in the mainstream culture. Some were of the middle and upper classes, or were artists. Others were independent, working class women who took on the guise of men in order to survive in a world where women had few options. As "men," these women, some of whom were Lesbians, married other women and raised families. They could live and enjoy their lives with women and still participate in the greater opportunities and privileges awarded to men. This choice was often based in explicit or covert feminism. When discovered, however, these women were often punished by society — arrested, fined, imprisoned, exposed, and forbidden to wear male clothing. Sometimes the contemporary media picked up on the appearances of these "she-men," and a number of rather sensational articles appeared, accompanied by photographs and drawings. Some of these graphics which are reproduced in Katz indicate women dressed in a "full set of male clothing" — from hat to suit to cane or umbrella, watch fobs and chains, to vests and shoes. Lesbians and other radical women such as the feminist Mary C. Walker, Harriet Hosmer, and Edmonia Lewis, the Black/Native American sculptor — were also dressing in much the same manner in the United States and Europe, not especially for the purpose of "passing" as men, but for the real and implied emotional, political, and social freedoms inherent in the male costume. This radical expression of emancipation (which has centuries of tradition behind it) continued well into the twentieth century and included both women of color and white women.

It seems possible that in the American culture where the term *dike* denoted "the full set of male clothing" or "a man in full dress," this term could also have been applied to *women* who dressed in such clothing. Possibly these early radical women, dressing and passing in male clothing, both permanently and on occasion, were in fact our first *dike* sisters in America.

Again, Julia Stanley, who feels that the above etymology for *dyke* is the most viable she has heard, comments: "Your proposed etymology doesn't exclude the possibility that Wentworth and Flexner were correct in their hypothesis. That is, you may have come up with the 'missing link' in the semantic development of the word *dyke*, since it is stretching it a bit to relate it to the Germanic *ditch*" (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

If my hypothesis is correct, it could further be proposed that the meaning of *dike* was changing during the time period from the late nineteenth century to circa 1920s-1940s; that *dike* had begun passing from a predominantly positive male and/or neutral meaning to a derogatory femaleslang term. Linguistically, it may have gone through a process called "degeneration of meaning." By the 1930s *dike*, preceded by the equally tabooed *bull*, had been assigned sexual and derogatory meanings which could be applied both to Lesbians and to heterosexual women practicing tabooed sexual behaviors. By the 1940s-1950s-1960s the pejorative term *dike/dyke* was almost exclusively applied to "masculine" Lesbians, with other meanings becoming more obscure, though not yet obsolete. Linguists have found that this "process of degeneration" is a pattern often occurring to words which make such a male to female transition.

For this same period of possible linguistic change, there is growing evidence indicating a general altering of attitudes toward women's relationships with each other.* Increasingly more negative aspects were being assigned to such relationships in the twentieth century than had been assigned them in the nineteenth century. Medical and psychiatric science was labeling such relationships "unnatural," "degenerate" and "sick." All manner of "masculine" characteristics of both a biological and psychological nature were attached to Lesbian women, as well as to other women who "deviated" from traditional, "godgiven," (male-defined) "female roles." Speculating once again—since words and their meanings are used to reinforce the values of

^{*}See Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," Signs 1:1 (Autumn, 1975): 1-29; Alice Echols, "The Demise of Female Intimacy in the Nineteenth Century or 'There wasn't a Dyke in the Land," unpublished paper, n.d., 34pp.

a given society, it may be that the linguistic change described above was related to the social/political change concerning definitions of Lesbianism and female sex roles. If a concept is assigned negative values, then the language used to describe that concept will also assume negative meaning. The language becomes a vehicle by which the value is perpetuated. Thus *dike*, once used to describe a well-dressed male, becomes a vulgar and hateful epithet to be hurled at women who rebel against confining roles and dress styles.

It is interesting to note how our "new" radical definitions echo the "old" radical traditions as signified by the term dike/dyke. Betty Birdfish, a friend in Chicago, wrote to me about a Lesbian dance to be held there, and how "wimmin are talking about 'dyking themselves up' for it." In my next letter, I asked Betty exactly what that meant —

"dyking ourselves up." She responded:

About 'dvking ourselves up': I think it can mean a whole lot of things. In general, dressing up so one feels most beautiful, most proud of herself. I've seen that take many forms in the dyke community, at events. For example, Allison with her hair in corn rows and beads, wearing African garb. Or Jogie with a tuxedo and panama hat. Or Beverly looking like a gypsy with loose-flowing clothes, jewelry, scarves and wearing scented oil. Or wimmin with tailored blazers and slacks and vests. Or even wimmin with long-flowing ankle length skirts or dresses. Many interpretations. Many expressions. For me, 'dyking up' means the tailored suit: elegant, comfortable and strong. I guess I don't see this wear as just a 'masculine' privilege — but clothing that wimmin/dykes can wear to feel good in. I think I'm no longer as afraid of feeling 'butchy': to work on my body, to develop muscles and strength, to be more active physically (sports, karate, etc.), to move with more force, strength, confidence. I'm realizing how stilted I've been by society which condemns this development in wimmin. And I realize how our own dyke community continues to condemn it by labelling it 'butchy' and therefore 'male-identified' and therefore wrong. I don't care anymore (in my head — but not yet in my gut) about all those condemnations — I want to grow in ways I know I've always wanted to.

(Betty Birdfish, August 4, 1977)

For the Lesbian of yesteryear, getting "diked up" may have had the same exhilarating, liberating and fearful effects it has for contemporary Lesbians, but even more so since few women at that time wore pants. To wear "male clothing" before the advent of trousers for women and the so-called "unisex" fashions of today, was indeed radical and revolutionary. It signified a rebellion against male-defined

roles for women, which "women's clothing" symbolized and perpetuated by rendering women passive, dependent, confined, and vulnerable. Yet this autonomous act of rebellion also made women vulnerable to punishment, ridicule, and ostracism.*

Dike/dyke need not remain a vulgar epithet of self-hate, shame, and negativism, a term signifying "masculine." This is the definition which a heterosexist, dyke-hating society has formulated and which many Lesbians past and present have unquestioningly accepted. By defining some of us as "men" and some of us as "women," society has sought to divide us, to create inequality based on heterosexual roles, thereby defusing the political power of women loving women, reducing it to a pseudo-heterosexuality which, according to their thinking, is both artificial and inferior to the "real thing." Dike/dyke still remains a word hidden in history. But this new etymology suggests the possibility of some quite radical origins. Rather than wincing at the word dyke, we might better remember and commemorate those early Lesbians and feminists who refused "women's clothing" and "women's roles." They may have been our first dyke sisters.



^{*} It should be noted that these vulnerabilities were not experienced by women *only* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As late as 1968, Lesbians were being arrested in Dallas and Houston, Texas for wearing "men's clothing." See: "Special Release to the Ladder." *The Ladder* 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):40-41; "Who Can Tell Boys from Girls." *The Ladder* 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):41-42.

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Women and Violence*

men don't take us seriously because they're not physically afraid of us.

Ellen Willis, 1968.

the upstairs neighbor. if i keep typing, i can't hear his sneering voice, i can check the anxiety rising: will i have to deal with him again — or swallow myself, absorb his blaring stereo, his endlessly stupid thrumming the same out-of-whack chords on the electric guitar. practicing, no doubt, to be the next dylan (dylan, who beat his wife).

last time i asked him to turn down the volume, he snarled, "why don't you & your friend move out?" "why don't you shut your mouth," i shout back, and he screams, "why don't you make me? you're supposed to be the man in this relationship." later i hear him bellowing from upstairs, "i'll fuck her ass."

in the morning my car's windshield is gooey with spit; pinned to my door is a picture of fancy condoms; a poster with my name on it, taped up in the hall, is crumpled, destroyed.

i got off easy.

(from my journal, october 30)

i was just doing dishes, afraid i'd miss some informative sound. had to keep turning off the water to listen. the man upstairs hates me because i'm queer, is threatening me.

so i do dishes, checking for sounds. at the same time, the familiar ordering act, washing dishes, hands in hot water, calms me. is this why we clean so furiously — to have one place where we are in control? i do dishes, rocking between contradictory voices:

- you exaggerate the danger, he's a cowardly wimp
- you underestimate the danger, you got him mad, you don't know what you're playing with

3 weeks ago i shouted "shut your fucking mouth" to a drunk man cursing me, my mother—there were 5 of us—and suddenly a second man materializes beside the car, he smashes the car window, grabbing my hair as i drive away.

to be prepared — in any instance of confronting a man — for violence. to be prepared to defend myself — or to keep my mouth shut: adjust to his noise, stomach his insults, accept his power.

these are our choices.

^{*}Melanie wrote a regular rumination in SW for several issues called "Scrambled Eggs." This was originally #3.

last night i dreamed i was walking to get the car, up stark to 20th, but the street was not a street, stark was a wind-tunnel, with machines for food, half-open doors printing shadows along the walls. i am trying to run against the wind, and think, suddenly: this is dangerous

my body is the criminal the fault my body's spirit

i offer these words to explain the danger, though i don't believe them. but the danger persists, as if they were true.

today's paper (november 2): in portland, a 32 year old woman getting off work in a department store, going for her car in the city center parking structure, got grabbed in the elevator and raped yesterday. one story. according to statistics, yesterday in portland between 2-20 women got raped. between 6-60 women got beaten. the same thing will happen today. of course these are only average counts.

every day in this country a woman gets raped every minute. 3 women get beaten every minute. these are also average counts.

what am i counting if not casualties of battle?

why then don't we admit we are at war?

every man: has probably raped or beaten a woman; or enjoyed rape fantasies; or threatened a woman with physical force, explicitly or with gestures — stepping closer, raising his voice; at least a man he works with or socializes with, who he thinks is an ok type, has raped or beaten a woman.

every woman: fears rape, or lives inside limits imposed by that fear: no late night walks, no living alone, no hours of solitude by the river. if she relates intimately to men, the threat of violence has probably sufficed to keep her in line. if she is a lesbian, her comfort is that the threat probably comes from men she is not intimate with.

since i began writing this, L—, a close friend, has been raped. she carries a knife, has fought men, though she's small — and he was big, quick. she was afraid to use her knife. now she has an infection and might be pregnant.

in sum: if you are a woman, you have probably been raped or beaten or will be; at least a woman you love has been raped or beaten or will be.

it's easy after saying this to think of men and women as separate species, one preying on the other.

the state of war waged on all women by men who are overtly violent gives all men power. rapists and batterers are the military arm of patriarchy.

to stop violence against women we have to change schools, laws, a system where a few white men make a profit off our labor; almost all films, records, record jackets, tv, toys, advertising, the junk we get sold in paper cartons at the supermarket, isolated living situations and overcrowded living situations: every difficult edge of this culture contributes directly or indirectly to violence against women. meanwhile there's another simpler fact:

men rape women because they can. men beat women because they can.

the only place where rape is considered a contemptible act is in prison — by other prisoners — not because it's cruel, hateful and vicious, but because everyone knows rape is a chicken-shit crime, a crime any fool can get away with.

in fact, few rapists land in prison. white skin, professional status, money: these are buffers, protecting rapists as they protect other criminals.

as for how batterers are treated in prison — who knows? they are arrested, prosecuted and convicted even less than rapists.

cops, judges, district attorneys, and legislators are (mostly) men who don't take women seriously.

men abuse us because they can get away with it.

our task then is to make abuse of women more and more risky, something men *can't* get away with.

* >

Inez Garcia Joan Little Yvonne Wanrow Jennifer Patri Claudia Thacker Sharon McNearney Evelyn Ware Janice Hornbuckle Hazel Kontos Lenore Coons Carolyn McKendrick Margaret Pratt Wanda Carr Francine Hughes Diane Davis Agnes Scott Marlene Roan Eagle Miriam Grieg Gloria Maldonado Julia Parker Price Bernestine Taylor Darlene Lis Virginia Tierce Elizabeth Mae Fulmer Gloria Timmons Evelyn Graham Jenna Kelsie Roxanne Gay Dessie Woods Shirley Martin Alta Bryan Patricia Evans Cathy Thomas Barbara Jean Gilbert Janice Painter Donna Ferth Nancy Stilson Barbara Carpenter Judy Wagner Georgia Wondel Nada Alayoubi Christina Pratt Sharon Crigler Lorilyn Allan Janet Billey Barbara Eacret Idalia Mejia Sandra Lowe Janet Hartwell Eva Mae Heygood Betty Jean Carter Lea Murphy Beverly Ibn-Thomas Mary Melerine Maxine Waltman Eva Diamond

these are the names of resistance fighters. the names of women whose attackers did not get away with it. the men who abused them are dead. the list continues to grow.

some of these women are in prison, along with hundreds of others whose names i don't know. their history is our history of resistance.

each of them has helped enlarge the possibility of resistance.

only as women choose to resist men's violence will men's consciousness change. when men are afraid of us, there will be a material base for changing their consciousness.

or at least we will be on terms of equality of fear.

when women are as ready to stand up to men as men are ready to knock down women we can begin to talk about our common humanity. not before.

i am talking about women and violence. most often we experience violence as something done to us. we know it's horrible; we have learned/are learning it's not our fault. so we suffer innocently. christian or jew, christ has not been a healthy model for oppressed people.

one step up from martyrdom, we support our right to defend ourselves. we organize, attend, and try to extend to other women classes in self-defense. we focus on dislocating knees. we try not to think about differences in size, weight, fighting skills, between an average one of us and an average one of them. we are anxious not to escalate violence, so we rarely carry weapons or know how to use them.

we gloss over the fact that most successful resistance involves some kind of equalizer: a weapon.

we recognize that women who fight back fight back for all of us. but in contradiction to the service performed for all women by those who resist is the fact that each resister has suffered for performing this service: at best, a painful and exhausting struggle in the courts; at worst, prison or death. as the death penalty is reinstated or its use is extended, we need to think about this.

the question arises inevitably:

if we need men to know that committing violence against us is dangerous — if the use of violence is acceptable in an emergency, as a desperate choice —

why wait for the next emergency, for the next woman in danger to choose self-defense at great cost to herself?

why not create our own emergencies???

imagine: every day in the paper, instead of a story about a woman who was attacked, raped, beaten, tortured and/or murdered — information which certainly has its effects on us — there were a story about a rapist or batterer who was beaten, shot, stabbed — even public humiliation would be better than nothing.

how long would it take woman-haters to get scared?

this subject — of women organizing to do violence to men — makes us uncomfortable. we are the life-support system of the universe. we birth, nourish, and repair. how should we not shrink from committing violence?

- are we more comfortable as victims?
- is fighting for our own people a guilty act?

when we try to envision ourselves using violence, we crash against the unthinkable, a taboo.

when we feel ourselves up against a taboo, we should ask ourselves: why is this horrible? why do we want to reject this? if we find no reason, only vague feelings of awfulness, we want then to think about this awfulness.

as long as a rule, commandment, behavior cowers in the unthinkable corner of our brain, we have no way of knowing whether the rule is ours or theirs, in our interest or theirs.

if using violence against men in an organized fashion is in our interest, and if we have reactions of discomfort, repulsion to the idea of fighting for our own people —

then maybe we need to struggle with our discomfort.

men don't take us seriously because they're not physically afraid of us.

one thing is clear:

whatever any of us chooses to feel, think, or do about women fighting abusive men, women continue to fight. increasingly. the question then is not, should this happen? — it is happening. the question is, how do i choose to relate to this fact of women's resistance?

and if this resistance heartens us with each new appearance, inspires and empowers us, the question shifts again:

how can i take part in this resistance?

the implications of what i'm saying do not escape me. i am frightened to write about them openly:

there is danger in fighting.

there is also danger in not fighting.

The thought and spirit of Paula King informs these words.

from Do You Remember Me?

 $oldsymbol{1}$ live in Cambridge now in an apartment in an old Victorian kind of house with a woman I love. Above us are two men, one studying law and the other political science and above them a single woman lives whose lover comes and stays for a few days and then he leaves to return again in a few weeks. The men who live above us are uncomfortable when they meet me in the hall, greet me without looking at me and are always in flight when we meet. The woman on the top floor does not engage with me in any way but visits with the students just below her. I wonder sometimes whether it is my lesbianism they cannot deal with or whether it is my age they cannot deal with. Usually, I conclude they do not deal with people who cannot give them something — and there is nothing I would give them in any way to aid their survival. The law student will soon be endorsing laws that will limit even further my power in the world and the political science instructor can do me nothing but harm. The woman who lives above the men has dinner with them occasionally, and waits to see what power she can align herself with in any tenant dispute.

In the world beyond the house where we live are students riding bicycles and walking along the brick streets or lying on the grass on the Common in summer. As we walk along the avenue, we hear the conversations of the young women telling each other about Him. The pubs along the avenue are filled with the young men the girls are talking about and are building their plans for their future around. But the young men in the pubs are together, without the women, laughing loudly, taking up a great deal of space, and being served by young

women anxious to please.

In contrast to the young walking through the streets, there are a few old people, moving slowly, bent over. They are mostly women, alone, carrying home a few groceries in a sack. There are a few old men. The old women do not enter the pubs, they do not drink beer, nor do they spend their evenings talking and laughing, and no young girls are waiting on them anxious to please.

[&]quot;Look Me in the Eye" was published in Barbara Macdonald's *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism* (1983, Spinsters, Inc., POB 410687, S.F., CA 94141).

But if you leave Harvard Square and walk down Cambridge Street to Inman Square — there you will find the beginnings of a small women's community. There is New Words, a bookstore of women's literature on feminism, lesbianism, the history of women. Almost any book at random confirms some of who I am and who I once was. But it is seldom that a woman past fifty ever enters the place; whenever I go I am the oldest woman there.

And if you walk on beyond New Words you come to Bread and Roses, a woman's restaurant, where the women who cook and serve you confirm your right to be in the world as a woman, as much as do the posters on the wall, posters of Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Gertrude Stein, Emma Goldman. The food is good and although groups of women sit together explaining, talking, laughing, there is not the struggle for space and the struggle to be heard that there is in the pubs along our avenue. And if you stay after supper on a Sunday, there may be a reading by some woman writer, or a film on Gertrude Stein or Georgia O'Keefe, or perhaps a film of Lillian Hellman's will be shown. But though all this is there to confirm the lives of womenthere is no woman there my age. I enter the restaurant and the film room always aware that I am the oldest woman there. I am glad the women's community has a beginning and is there to support women but I am aware that it is not there to confirm who I am. The younger women there have no place in their heads to fit me into, have no idea what I come for as no other woman my age comes, and yet I am nearer the age of most of the women on their posters from whom they draw their support.

Sometimes I feel the young women are supported by other young women on the basis of a promise or a hope of who they may become, but that they demand that I somehow already have proved my right to be taken in. Sometimes I feel like the only way I'll really get into Bread and Roses — alive in the eyes of the young women — is dead,

on a poster.

Wherever we go, Cynthia and I, to the pubs, to the theatre to see "The Word is Out," to hear Adrienne Rich or Olga Broumas, Mary Daly, Kate Millett, or to some meeting of the lesbian caucus of NOW, I am always the oldest woman.

I keep wondering where everybody else is. Where are the friends I drank beer with in the fifties? Where are the young women I slept with in the thirties and forties? Did they never grow old? Did they never reach sixty-five along with me? Sometimes, alone on the streets,

Ilook about me and feel there has been some kind of catastrophe from which only I have been spared. Sometimes in desperation I search out some woman my own age on the street, or at some bus stop, or in some laundromat, to ask her, "Do you remember me? Did we drink beer together in the pubs in Seattle? Did we sleep together, you and I, in the thirties when there were no jobs and never enough to eat and love carried the whole burden to see us through?" But there is no look of recognition in her eyes. I see instead fear, I see that she is paralyzed with fear, that she does not know where my friends and lovers have gone, that she cannot remember who it was she used to be. She wants to show me pictures of her grandchildren as though all of her answers could be found there — among the living. And I go on down the street and I know there has been a catastrophe, a holocaust of my generation of women, and I have somehow been spared.

My feeling of having been spared is confirmed in the way that no one seems to be expecting me anywhere. Even if I go into a local shop to buy clothes, I am always greeted with the question, "Is this for yourself?" as though I somehow must be buying for someone else or as though I didn't buy clothes for myself; as though I must have some supply somewhere in an old trunk, left me by my mother, there

waiting for me to wear when I reached the right age.

But I have grown to like living in Cambridge. I like the sharp lines of the reality of my life here. The truth is I like growing old. Oh, it isn't that I don't feel at moments the sharp irrevocable knowledge that I have finally grown old. That is evident every time I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and brush my teeth. I may begin as I often do, wondering if those teeth that are so much a part or myself, teeth I've clenched in anger all my life, felt with my own tongue with a feeling of possession, as a cat licks her paw lovingly just because it is hers wondering, will these teeth always be mine? Will they stay with me loyally and die with me, or will they desert me before the Time comes? But I grow dreamy brushing my teeth and find myself, unaware, planning as I always have when I brush my teeth—that single-handed crossing I plan to make. From East to West, a last stop in the Canaries and then the trade winds. What will be the best time of year? What boat? How much sail? I go over again the list of supplies, uninterrupted until some morning twinge in my left shoulder reminds me with uncompromising regret that I will never make that single-handed crossing-probably. That I have waited too long. That there is no turning back.

But I always say probably. Probably I'll never make that single-handed crossing. Probably, I've waited too long. Probably, I can't turn back now. But I leave room now, at sixty-five, for the unexpected. That was not always true of me. I used to feel I was in a kind of linear race with life and time. There were no probablys, it was a now or never time of my life. There were landmarks placed by other generations and I had to arrive on time or fail in the whole race. If I didn't pass—if the sixth grade went on to the seventh without me, I would be one year behind for the rest of my life. If I graduated from high school in 1928, I had to graduate from college in 1932. When I didn't graduate from college until 1951, it took me twenty years to realize the preceding twenty years weren't lost. But now I begin to see that I may get to have the whole thing and that no experience longed for is really going to be missed.

"I like growing old." I say it to myself with surprise. I had not thought that it could be like this. There are days of excitement when I feel almost a kind of high with the changes I feel taking place in my body, even though I know the inevitable course my body is taking will lead to debilitation and death. I say to myself frequently in wonder, "This is my body doing this thing." I cannot stop it, I don't even know what it is doing, I wouldn't know how to direct it; my own body is going through a process that only my body knows about. I never grew old before; never died before. I don't really know how it's done, I wouldn't know where to begin, and God knows, I certainly wouldn't know when to begin—for no time would be right. And then I realize, lesbian or straight, I belong to all the women who carried my cells for generations and my body remembers how for each generation this matter of ending is done.

We never really know the beginning or the middle, until we have

lived out an ending and lived on beyond it.

Of course, this time, for me, I am not going to live beyond this ending. The strangeness of that idea comes to me at the most unexpected moments and always with surprise and shock, sometimes I am immobilized by it. Standing before the mirror in the morning, I feel that my scalp is tight. I see that the skin hangs beneath my jaw, beneath my arm; my breasts are pulled low against my body; loose skin hangs from my hips, and below my stomach a new horizontal crease is forming over which the skin will hang like the hem of a skirt turned under. A hem not to be "let down," as once my skirts were, because I was "shooting up," but a widening hem to "take up" on an

old garment that has been stretched. Then I see that my body is being drawn into the earth—muscle, tendon, tissue and skin is being drawn down by the earth's pull back to the loam. She is pulling me back to herself; she is taking back what is hers.

Cynthia loves bulbs. She digs around in the earth every fall, looking for the rich loamy mold of decayed leaves and vegetation, and sometimes as she takes a sack of bone meal and works it into the

damp earth, I think, "Why not mine? Why not?"

I think a lot about being drawn into the earth. I have the knowledge that one day I will fall and the earth will take back what is hers. I have no choice, yet I choose it. Maybe I won't buy that boat and that list of supplies; maybe I will. Maybe I will be able to write about my life; maybe I won't. But uncertainty will not always be there, for this is like no other experience I have ever had — I can count on it. I've never had anything before that I could really count on. My life has been filled with uncertainties, some were not of my making and many were: promises I made myself I did not keep, promises I made others I did not keep, hopes I could not fulfill, shame carried like a weight heavier by the years, at my failure, at my lack of clear purpose. But this time I can rely on myself, for life will keep her promise to me. I can trust her. She isn't going to confuse me with a multitude of other choices and beckon me down other roads with vague promises. She will give me finally only one choice, one road, one sense of possibility. And in exchange for the multitude of choices she no longer offers, she gives me, at last, certainty. Nor do I have to worry this time that I will fail myself, fail to pull it off. This time, for sure I am going to make that single-handed crossing.

Surviving and More: Interview with Mabel Hampton

 $oldsymbol{I}$ met Mabel Hampton in 1950 when I was 10 years old. She was a friend and buddy of my mother's; they both were devoted to betting on the horses to get over hard times and there were many hard times. Mabel and my mother remained confidantes until my mother's death in 1977. Mabel was the first Lesbian woman I knew; she used to read Lesbian paperbacks, carrying them in her raincoat pocket with the covers turned in so she could read them on the subway in peace. She and her lover of forty years, Lillian Foster, lived in the South Bronx. I would bring my lovers to meet them, hoping to get their approval. Now our relationship is much deeper. Mabel had her own library all these years a self-educated woman, she always looked for Lesbian images. She donated her Lesbian paperbacks and her collection of Wonder Women comics to the Archives. Since Lillian's death last summer, Mabel is sharing more and more of her life with us. She spends Wednesdays at the Archives, sleeps over and leaves Thursday morning. She never misses her Archives days, and it is a long subway trip to get here. Mabel Hampton is a wise strong loving woman who never lost her integrity either as a Black woman or as a Lesbian.

-Joan Nestle

Mabel, how old are you?

Seventy-seven, May the second, last.

How long have you been a Lesbian?

I've been a Lesbian since I was a very young girl, well, let's say about eight or nine. Now that I know what it is, why, I can see that I've been this, I've been in the life since I was very young. And I liked it because I could understand, even at that age, I understood women and I liked them. I didn't understand exactly what it was until I got up into my teens, but then I was glad that I liked them.

How do you feel being in your seventies?

I feel all right ... maybe I have a little arthritis, and I'm trying to get rid of that, and I'm glad I'm at this age because then I understand what the rest of the young people are going through, and if there's anything I can tell them to do, I'd be more than glad to do it.

As long as they're a Lesbian, and they like it, I'd say — keep it up — because, in my experience, it's nothing to be ashamed of, you're not hurting anybody — it's just that you like women, and you're supposed to like them, because your mother held you so close to her all the time. And you should feel that you're part of every woman, and try to do the best you can for them...

How do you feel about women yourself at this point? Do you still find women attractive?

Oh, yes. [emphatically] Yes, I do, I find them very attractive, and a little desirable, um hm. I still smile at them, and they smile at me, and that makes it better.

I had a birthday party given to me by a dear friend, and I met quite a few friends, people I knew, and people I didn't know, and I also met a lady in the Congress, in the House of Representatives, a hundred and five years old, so I think I should take a back seat on that. And she kissed me, and we talked, and she was very nice. And in comin' on down, I met another woman, oh! I was given a party at the Senior Citizens', and there was a woman there eighty years old, and her and I was the oldest ones there. So we talked...it just made me feel good to know that I've arrived at this age, and am still going strong [laughs].

You sure are! Tell about your philosophy about doctors. About how you

feel — you don't go to doctors. You use herbs and things.

I think the reason that I have the health I have is that I don't believe in doctors. They're all right, but so much happens, where the doctor is implicated in it. All I like is my tea, different teas, nettle tea, parsley tea, and they have brought me around, because I had arthritis. Labor Day I had a muscle spasm and a stroke along with it, and now I'm feeling fine, I got rid of all of it, and I can walk, and then, I couldn't walk, and I was in bed two and a half weeks. [What about garlic?] Oh, yes, garlic goes along with parsley... After I had the muscle spasm I got to go for a book that was sent me, and that book has done me a world of good. [Is that the Chinese herb book?] That's right, they recommend ginseng, ginseng tea, and so, you know, I'm feeling better? I can get my hands back of my head, and all that, see, and I think, and I may hope, that I may live to the ripe old age of eighty-five.

I advise everyone: you have to live right, and you're living right if you're a Lesbian! ... Live right. You've got to live right, that's right, live a clean life. Don't be messing around with other people's property. Then if you do, then whatever you do, whatever you want to get out of life, you've got to put something in it to get out, and that something is living decent and taking care of your body, and everybody else's body — help everyone else, help as best you can.

How do you feel different now from, say, when you were thirty?

Oh, when I was thirty I was runnin' like gangbusters! Oh, boy, I was runnin' after girls, I was carryin' on, I had myself thirty, I had myself a lily white time! All the girls, in the show — I was in the show — was dancin' in the night-clubs, I just had a ball!

How do you feel now?

Well, I can't dance now. How do I feel about it? Well, I do the best I can now. I used to sing, when I was thirty, I was singing in the chorus, at town hall, and Carnegie Hall, I was taking lessons from Robert Malone, and we went into a couple of places and had concerts ...

Do you feel wiser now? Wiser about life?

Well, about my life, yes, I went through enough to know that things are entirely different, and I'm glad I went through it, because now I can look back and see the things that happened, but if I had it to do over again, I would be a Lesbian, but there's a lot of things I wouldn't do. I'd still be a Lesbian, and be smiling at the ladies [laughs], and settin' lookin' at them, admiring them.

Do you feel that your feeling about women has given you strength?

You're a pretty independent person.

Well, naturally, women give you, when you're going with women you get a lot of strength because they sympathize with you and you sympathize with them, and that's the way it is, and they stick with you, you see, they stick right with you, and those that don't just let 'em go, don't bother with them. Now, what else?

What do you have to tell younger Lesbian women? What would you want to tell them about what they have to look forward to, about feelings

about aging? All these women are frightened of getting older.

Oh, that's stupid!

Why do you think it's stupid?

Well, I'll tell you why ... After all, you're not on this planet to stay any length of time — you stay your time out, see, like I just said, I want to live to eighty-five, I don't know, though, if my time allotted will be up tomorrow.

Were you ever afraid of getting old?

No, I never thought about getting old. I just lived from this day to the next day, to the next day, see, because it ain't necessarily gettin' old because you're going to stay here until your time is up, whether you're two years old or a hundred and two! You're going to stay until your time is up. If we knew that, then we'd be different.

Mabel, do you ever get angry at how you get treated in this society as

an older Black woman?

There's nobody, practically, that makes me angry now, I don't pay anybody any attention, all my friends that I've had for years and years they treat me nice; everybody likes me — seems that way, they smile at me — but me, I have a sharp answer for everybody, and therefore they tell me I shouldn't do it, but with me, being my age, I

believe I can do anything I want to do. And if I don't like you, I don't bother with you. Therefore, you cannot hurt me, because I don't give you a chance. I read you before you read me, and that's your worry.

Mabel, just lately we've been going to some conferences together —could you talk about them? What do you think about what's going on in the Lesbian community? How does it make you feel? Like the conference out in Brooklyn?

[This was the Lesbian survival conference in Brooklyn, NY, and

we attended the workshop on growing older as Lesbians.]

I enjoyed that, I'd like to go back there and meet those people, because even if they haven't been long in the life, I believe that they'll stay in it, because a younger person will get in and get out, but an older person won't — they'll stay. And me, I've always stayed there because I liked it, from a child, see.

Mabel, what plans do you have for your future? What kind of things would you like to do more of?

Well, I'd like to visit lots of the senior citizen projects and see how they're getting along, and go in and look around.

What about in the Lesbian community?

Oh, I'd love to be in with them, but right now it seems like there's so many straight women, I call them straight women, that's all mixed up so that you've got to focus your mind on a couple of people to see who they are.... If you're not true, you don't know who's a Lesbian, who isn't, because all of them act the same. You've got to sit down, and talk to them, pick 'em, just like you would a Chinese puzzle, so you can find out who they are, what they are, what they do, and how they did it.

Mabel, remember when we heard that there were two women in a nursing home in Boston, and you wanted to do a tape? Why did you want to do that?

I want to do a tape, because I want to get their version of when they met and how long they've been together, and what happened, when they first met. When they were young, they must've been passionate in love with each other. And they just stayed together, stayed together, and those are people I like, but you've got to look and look to find those people ...

Do you think it's important to find these women and put them on tape? Well, yeah, if they agree with it, yes. But there's so many people, I've talked to quite a few people — people are nervous about it — and why, I don't know, but they are, they don't want to be implicated in it. I don't know what they're afraid of, but...

But you're not afraid. You make tapes all the time for the Archives.

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I'll tell you, Joan, how I feel about the Archives. We are going ahead and going ahead means that Lesbians are branching out. In years to come I might be gone, but thank God at least I'll go down in history. I want to be a part of going on. The Archives is a marvelous thing. It should be widened. Each country should have one. We need to work together and stick together. My life has had three parts, the first is God, the next part is passion, the third is love. I may be wrong but that is how I lived my life. Now I have a staunch true friend. I will find the passion somewheres else.

I don't have nobody to be afraid of. You remember that. I've always been Mabel Hampton, and I always continue to be Mabel Hampton.

(transcribed and edited by Leigh Star)



Mabel Hampton and friend photo by JEB (#10, 1979)

from An Interview with Joan and Deborah of the Lesbian Herstory Archives

In 1974 there was a pantry, dark, and empty except for a single file cabinet. I knelt on the floor to examine the contents of the cabinet, a complete set of The

Ladder. This was the embryo of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Five years later the Archives has outgrown the pantry, spills into the kitchen, the dining room, the front hall, the bedrooms of the upper West Side apartment that houses it. In the pantry where I first held The Ladder, shelves of our serial publications line an entire wall. And all over the apartment I see walls of books, office cabinets, flyers, posters, collages, framed photographs, and a bulletin board whose announcements include notice of lesbian raft trips, a black bibliography, a southeastern lesbian writers' conference, a Jewish lesbian anthology.

Today there are over three thousand volumes in the Archives collection. How many unpublished papers and letters and articles, clippings, taped interviews, radio shows, videotapes, photographs and manuscripts there are, no

one knows exactly.

The Archives collective has lost members and gained members, but three have been constant from the beginning. Valerie Itnyre, Deborah Edel and Joan Nestle together have done the day-to-day work of the Archives these five years.

In April I spoke with Deborah and Joan, the two who share their home with the Archives collection and with the hundreds of women who visit each year. Since much of our conversation concerns beginnings, visions and quests, Joan starts out with the story of a woman who chose to begin her journey at the Archives.

Joan: The Archives reaches out in ways that we didn't plan for. One day we were sitting around and there was a knock on the door. I went to answer it and it was a woman, probably in her mid- to late forties, and she had a huge backpack on.

Deborah: A little lady.

J: She said her name, she said she was from Hawaii and she'd tried to call us but the line was busy so she just took the risk of coming. Her story was that she had been married for many years. She had raised, I think, five children—the oldest was in his twenties. She had gotten a divorce, gone to law school, and come out as a lesbian woman. She'd just finished law school, and "before she got married to another institution," is how she put it, she wanted to make a pilgrimage through, or to, the lesbian community as she had understood it to be from Hawaii; and she had certain places on her journey that she was going to stop. She'd made no previous arrangements.

The place she wanted to begin her journey was the Archives. So we welcomed her... She stayed here for three days. What she would do, she would get up in the morning, have her healthy breakfast, and she would sit — she didn't even sit on a chair, she sat on the floor in a corner of the Archives — and she would just reach out and pull out things.

We would have dinner together and she would tell us her itinerary. She would say she was going to Buffalo ... "but woman," we'd say, it's terrible snow storms up there now, you know: you're from Hawaii." "No, no, that's o.k., that's where my spirit tells me I have to go," and then when she left she said she knew she was right to begin here, that it was like sitting under a waterfall, in the Archives room.

... around two months later two women came to the Archives from the Actors' Sorority, a lesbian theater group in Kansas City, and they said Jackie says hello. So she was making her trek. It's this image of an older woman launching herself into the lesbian world, and finding it, that symbolizes the Archives.

D: She did something that I thought was very brave also. She had written a series of coming-out letters to old friends, and if their responses weren't fully real, she wanted to go deal with them directly.

J: Her courage and her spiritual vision and her faith that we'd all be there is symbolic of the Archives. Her courage to journey at this point in her life.

Something we found from the Archives is that many, many of our women are on journeys. The Archives gives them a stopping-off place, a renourishing place. We are a very brave people. ...

D: How did you link back up with Mabel?

J: Mabel always stayed friends with my mother because they went to the race track together all the time, and they helped each other through hard times. So I knew Mabel, and Lillian, the woman she lived with for forty years who died this June.

Mabel was the witness to my coming-out, and to my mother's upsetness. Mabel told me something the last time she was here, that when I was coming out, my mother called her in the middle of the night and said, "If my daughter is a lesbian, I'm going to kill myself"; and Mabel said to her, "There's nothing you can do, she chooses, that's her life, you have to let her do it." Mabel was sort of the bridge between me and my mother.

I remember the first woman I was involved with, Susan. Mabel was at the house and my mother came home drunk and was in a very bad way. Susan got very scared and ran out of the apartment. I was holding on to my mother, trying to get her to calm down, and Mabel turned to me and said, "Now you leave your mother alone and go

after your woman." And I ran out the door after Susan. This was the

first recognition and support for my relationship.

But how we got together again was, when I was out, I guess around 1960, I was with Carol, and I'd been off and on in touch with Mabel. And Mabel told me there was going to be this big dance up in the South Bronx. It was going to be drag dance, for male and female homosexuals. I wanted Mabel to meet Carol so we went to their home and spent the night there; and we went to this dance at this ballroom. It was just incredible, hundreds of people, women in suits and men in dresses.

D: What did you wear?

J: I wore a dress, Carol wore a suit, and I remember to this day coming down the steps and a woman saying to Carol, "Can I borrow your woman? She's really saying something."

D: And you love it, you love it!

J: I love it to this day, being an old femme.

B: You said once that the Archives really began with Mabel. That

she was an example for you of strength and self-cherishing.

J: Yes. Mabel was raised in the south by her grandmother and then came to New York when she was about seven. She stayed for a short time with an uncle who molested her. She ran away and worked in white people's houses from the age of nine. She said she was a lesbian from when she was a little girl playing in Winston-Salem.

Years ago she was doing the things that we as a community are doing now. In her own way she was an archivist. Her whole life she was always looking for lesbian images. She taught herself to read; and she'd save the Wonder Woman comics because they were images of

strong women.

D: She saved the old paperbacks.

J: She had a lot of the fifties paperbacks, which she prized.

She was political in her own way. She was cherishing of her own history, and knew there were other women like her. She tried to find the hidden images. And she was also seeking another way of knowledge; she joined the Rosicrucians in a search for a spiritual vision which she preserves today in the Eastern Star. Because she had a strong sense that things were wrong, that men were keeping women from their full power.

B: What is Mabel's relationship to the Lesbian Herstory Archives

today?

J: She has become very important to the Archives. In fact, she uses it more than any other woman. Even though reading for her is very hard because she's had cataract operations, she spends hours in that room, reading through what she's missed. It's like a hunger. She's just

finished reading Patience and Sarah. And she just read Ethel Waters...

D: And Ann Shockley.

J: Yes, if Ann Shockley could hear this, Mabel wants so much to thank her for *Loving Her* which she read three times and made sure we gave copies to every one of her friends. She felt it was such an important work for her.

We sent her the newsletter. And Mabel, who is living on social security, sent us a donation—when she's donated her whole life. And

she tells all her friends about the Archives.

D: Also she gave us her thirties, forties, fifties paperback collection. Our collection has grown since then, but it's what she had saved all these years that started the Archives' collection.

J: We've been doing an oral history with Mabel. And finally around a month ago she said, "All I want to do is be remembered."

B: I don't think she needs to worry.... Judith Schwarz has been a member of the collective for about two months now, hasn't she? How

did you get together with her?

J: One of the very exciting things about the Archives is that so many women are beginning things, particularly research in lesbian history. They're working without support, those that aren't academically based. It's exciting that we share beginning moments, and one was when Judith Schwarz, whom we did not know at all, who has now become a member of the Archives and also a member of our family — she wrote us a letter about how she'd been doing grassroots research in the Library of Congress, hours and hours, after her ACLU typist job, and women told her she was crazy, all she was interested in was dirty linen, why did she want to know about women's private lives, that was gossip.

She wrote us a letter saying, "Am I crazy?" It was a very finely typed and finely worded letter. I read it and I got so excited, I sat down and typed one of my emotional outpourings about how it was just the opposite, that what she was doing was putting the center back into things, that she could not listen to those who questioned the importance of what she was doing because they were the ones who created the emptiness in the first place. And I was so afraid that my letter was

going to be too crazy...

D: ...for this proper woman, who typed so neatly.

J: She wrote back and she was so grateful we just exchanged letters almost weekly after that.

D: Also, both of you had discovered the connection of your mothers' deaths which was very present for both of you at the time, and it was another bond between you.

B: Does this happen often, that you bond with women who write you or who come to use the Archives?

J: That's another thing that makes the Archives so special. Since the Archives is in our home, when women use it, they do share in what is going on in our lives. One of the principles of the Archives is that it be an integral part of lesbian reality, not an isolated collection. We try not to let what's going on here personally get in the way of a woman who has something concrete and special to do. But what we found — we've had hard times here — is an incredible caring on the part of women who we have never met before and may never meet again but who come here and, either through a conversation or through something they overhear us say, become involved.

I have gotten incredible caring and support for my own difficulties. It is a world of caring that grows out of that room, a center that radiates. A caring for the collectiveness of all of us also deepens the caring for us individually. So whenever I hear women saying they don't know where the lesbian community is, it's very hard for me, because we always feel that ...

B: ... you live there ...

J: ... we live there, that the Archives is at the heart of things.

D: It's also been incredible because it's never stopped; no matter what was going on in our lives, it's always managed to keep on flowing...

B: Will you talk about what the Archives has meant to you?

J: It has meant life to me.

It started as a political and philosophical and personal issue, but I never imagined it would be as personal as it has become. It's, I would use the word magic—how can I say it?—it's almost as if it has an understanding of things, almost as a living person. During the time I've been ill, whatever I can do, the Archives has something for me to do. It has never made me feel useless or valueless or completely dependent. There is always something to create with it, even if it's just clipping articles, which is what I do sometimes.

B: You once said that you would remember these early years of the

Archives as its golden age. Why?

J: I just see it as very gentle and very personal, the way it is now. There's a glory to it, in its simplicity, in the smallness of the room, and in its coherency. We don't have large amounts of money to worry about now and it's all very manageable. Now every woman who comes, helps create it, and it's still small enough that every woman can see her own impact, can touch everything that's there. Women sit shoulder to shoulder, as if the voices could all hear each other still. As

we grow as a culture, or as we accumulate more as a culture, some of that immediacy won't be there. But now there's a quiet strength to it that I wish all lesbian women could share in.

B: Fran Winant is an example of a woman seeing her impact on the Archives.

J: Yes. I had known Fran superficially for years and years but never have I been able to tell her how really important she is.... Way before we knew she was coming, we had made a blow-up of one of her paintings of her dog who's very dear to her... And we had posted it... She walked into the Archives room, this woman who I thought would know for sure how at the center of things she was, and she wept.

What she wrote in the book, we read afterwards, was, "This has brought tears to my eyes. You understand." And for us it was such a gift to be able to say to her, "You have to understand too, you have to know how it's voices like yours who've kept our spirits intact." So it was a beautiful moment of being able to say thank you to someone I

wanted to thank for many years.

B: Do you dread the future, that the Archives will change so much and your relationship with it will change?

D: We realize that the Archives has to grow ...

J: ... into its own entity. We have a future vision of it, of its having a house with various rooms for all aspects of lesbian culture. So our visual artists would have space, our performing artists would have space, our sculptors would have space, and there would be room for women to sleep in and to eat together in. There would be a living creating of culture at the same time it is being documented. The Archives house would be a living symbol of our cherishing of generations. And it would have its own kind of excitement and its own kind of spirit.

D: I hope that it will always have a sense of caring that so many larger spaces lose in the process of becoming larger and dealing with more money and more objects and more things. There can be a hollowness to a building. I'm sure that won't happen, because in the shaping of the Archives, we will have already created a nurturing

space, and so it can't grow into a hollow.

B: How are you shaping the Archives?

J: We thought that the first, say, ten years of our life with the Archives would be spent building an atmosphere as much as building a collection. We would be creating a world of confidence in us who are working with the Archives, an attitude of acceptance, and getting our community used to the idea that there would be an on-going intergenerational place that would be for *all* lesbian women. Not for

a specific school of thought or a specific age group or specific class or

specific cultural group, but for all of us.

How the Archives does things is as much a part of the culture it has created as what it collects. For instance, it wouldn't be our Archives —it wouldn't be a lesbian archives — if it ever was some place where lesbian women didn't have access to it. It wouldn't be our Archives if you ever needed a letter of referral to be able to use it or if there wasn't a place for women to rest when they were tired or to eat when they were hungry.

B: Or if there was a fee to use it.

D: Or if we got swallowed up into someone else's collection. Even

if it was a feminist library.

J: We drew up some principles that we hope will be picked up by the next generation. One principle we hope will always stay loud and clear is that the word lesbian will never be diluted, will never be lost. And our Archives will never be turned into a woman's archives or a gay archives. But will be the one place that the word, the noun, lesbian will echo through the generations.

Though we know that women each time may choose a different word to call themselves — I mean, when I first came out, dyke was a very hard word and now it's a wonderful word. Each generation will take the glory of naming itself. That's the spirit of the Archives, that

we take what has been abused and turn it into cherishing.

B: Are you training another generation to come along and take over for you?

D: We see that as part of what we have to do.

J: The first thing that we have done — we hope when this interview is published we'll be incorporated — is set up a legal identity that gives us a way to hand down what we've created and keep it safe from the patriarchal society. We have created a foundation, and we hope that the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation will become an umbrella group to encourage and provide sustenance for lesbian cultural workers in all different fields, and that out of these women working will come those who take on the Archives as their generational commitment.

But we've realized that in any time there'll be only a small group of women who can say, or will want to say, "Yes, this is my way of being political; this is how I want to live, giving all my time and energies to the Archives." So we're working out other ways. For instance, having what we call Daughters of the Archives, women who undertake a project for a short period of time and don't have to say, "I'm giving all my life, I will become a vestal virgin of the Archives,"

but instead can say, "I will work," for instance, "on documenting

lesbian photography from 1970 to 1980."

Once we build up a sense of our endurance and our integrity and our commitment, and we do as much of the shit work as possible, like getting the incorporation out of the way, getting our cataloging, setting up the procedures so that when women come into it they don't have to do the paperwork but can be more imaginative once we do this, we think that we really won't have any problems in getting women to commit themselves to working on the Archives.

Also, there's a whole generation now of lesbian archivists. We've got in touch with several who've been trained in patriarchal archival schools who are now saying, "How can I contribute my skills to the Archives?"

And we hope eventually the Archives will be able to pay us a salary, will be able to reimburse women who are giving their skills.

B: Do you have a lifetime commitment to the Archives? Do you see yourself working in the Archives, in the middle of the Archives, until you die?

J: We do have a lifelong commitment. We've also learned that lifelong can be as long as tomorrow or ten years or fifty years.

B: Deb, do you have any reservations about a lifetime commit-

ment to the Archives?

D: As long as I can see myself in a fluid relationship to it, no. But I would, if I thought we would be so involved and so tied to it that we would end up creating an atmosphere that would exclude other women. I have a strong sense of commitment to the Archives, but it doesn't mean that thirty years from now I'm going to be living with the collection, either literally or figuratively, on such a day-to-day basis. That I have no way of knowing. Ten years ago I had no vision of the Archives, so it would be wrong of me to try to be literal and say, "Yes, in ten years I still will be cataloging." But I have committed myself to the Archives, to helping it grow.

B: Can you talk about how your life has changed, living with this

collection?

J: Our days are in layers; we never know what's going to happen. The telephone rings all the time. The other night it began with a woman here using the Archives. She was going to hear Kate Millett speak the same place we were and since she lived in Westchester and didn't want to go all the way back, we said, "OK, why don't you stay for dinner?" Then another friend came, and then a woman from Boston, Monica, called and we ended up having ten for potluck dinner.

B: Are you kidding!

J: No, it just grew. And then we all traipsed over to Gay Women's Alternative. But very much, that's what happens, depending on the women's needs and what's going on in the house. A visit to the Archives seldom stops with using the material. It becomes women sitting down at the table and talking about "why are you interested in this?" or about an issue in the community; it's women sharing food.

B: Do you find there are greater numbers of women coming here?

J: Yes. Sometimes there are so many women working here that nobody knows who lives in the house ...

B: Do women ever come as groups?

J: Yes. Groups are using the house, which is wonderful. I never went to a private school; it gives me the first feeling of a dormitory. There are field trips to the Archives. And there's a group taking a course in lesbian literature at Barnard, so they come in groups of three and four to work here; and there's a wonderful feeling of all this young energy. I can *shtup* them with coffee and soup.

B: I remember the first time I stayed here. It was the 1974 Gay Academic Union, and you had women sleeping all over the floor. You

were so happy to have a lesbian houseparty.

J: I haven't changed much in five years.

D: She's still trying for pajama parties all the time.

B: And you, Deb, how has your life changed living with the collection?

D: It's been incredible, the sense of women passing through, and they are always passing through. It's trying to hold onto a certain amount of privacy and space that I need at the same time that we've opened up our house to women coming into it. It's been incredible because we've met wonderful wonderful women.

But there are some days that I think if I see another piece of paper or an index card I will puke.

B: I find your generosity amazing.

J: The Archives is based on our principles of resource-sharing. We have a whole history of resources that allows the Archives to come into being. If we didn't have the size apartment we had, which means, if we didn't have the jobs that we have...

We say, "What is it that we want to do? What do we have that we can share?" We didn't have money to rent a separate building, so we used our apartment. We didn't have the money or the knowledge — we hadn't gone to archival school — so we went to libraries and we spoke to women who did. We learned about archiving and we found places we could buy things cheaper.

Every time a woman comes to the Archives there's another

sharing. Women will say to us, "Oh, you need stationery? OK, I'll rip

it off from my office" or "You need xeroxing? I'll do that."

The Archives is an act of empowering. We have taken a power or we have created a power. We must not stop at the limits imposed upon us but must think imaginatively, "How far can we take what we have?" And I think one of the givens of being a lesbian is that we have huge amounts of imagination and strength.

This is a message to the whole community: I see us as a colonized people, and one thing a colonized people know is that the society who thinks you shouldn't exist in the first place isn't going to make it easy for you to create or to survive. And so, rather than talk about what we

don't have, we use what we do have.

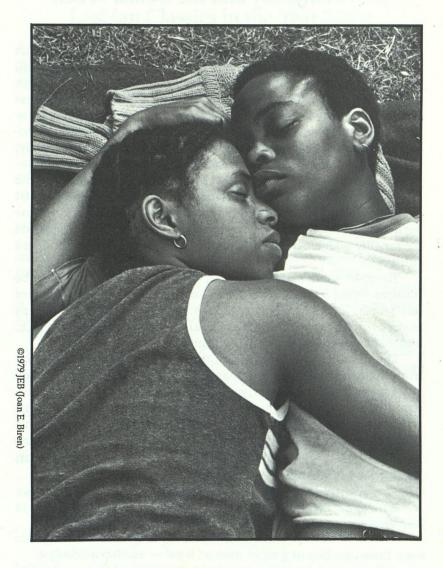
B: How did you come to see us as an oppressed people?

J: It was reading a passage in a book. This was around five years ago. I had been teaching a third world studies program for six years. I had been reading the literature of colonized peoples and part of me knew that being a lesbian in this country is to be colonized. But it didn't hit home until I read *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and I started to change the pronouns to *she*. There was one incredible paragraph about how the colonized are ruled out of time, and how they lose their sense of lineage. The last sentence in the paragraph was, "The colonized are condemned to lose their memory."

It was the word *condemned*. Condemned. It's the image of imprisonment to death. Without our memories we are in an endless prison. It became the banner of the Archives, to reverse the condemnation.

B: What is the motto of the Archives?
J: In memory of the voices we have lost.

1991: The Lesbian Herstory Archives has outgrown the apartment and needs a building. Make donations out to LHEF and/or contact them at PO Box 1258, NYC, NY 10116.



Priscilla and Regina. Brooklyn, NY, 1979. photo by JEB (#11, 1979)

from Anonymity and the Denial of Self

The expectation of the dominant culture has always been that women will be pleasing to men; that we will efface our/selves — that we will be satisfied with, in fact long for, anonymity: this is not news. But with this realization, as with the realizations of many factors in our common past, it is necessary to investigate the effects of anonymity on our history (matriology) and our tradition (matriography) and our/selves (matrices), as well as to examine the details of the phenomenon more closely, in the past and present, to ensure our survival into the future...

What it comes down to is this: by removing the identity of the artist, the critic is attempting to remove the personality of that artist from her work.... To credit a woman with work that is hers is to allow her a separate existence: to see her work as the expression of a separate personality which may be threatening to the phallocentric dominant culture....

To make some statement about the self means — if it is to be positive —that one holds the self in esteem: that there is a feeling of self—worth....When we choose to create, and to name our creations as our own, we are engaging in a radical act of separation from which, historically, we have consistently been discouraged....

The refusal to be anonymous, the decision to separate the self from the expectations and demands of roles, is the choice women must make if we are to survive. To me this is what it means to be a feminist: not to be anonymous, not to deny the self. To be a feminist is to attempt the rescue of other women from the various constraints which culminate in anonymity; but the first responsibility is to define the self: To stand separate, alone, saying my woman's self, my matrix, is the source of my identity.

from Culture Making: Lesbian Classics in the Year 2000?

When beth hodges asked me if i'd write something on lesbian classics in the year 2000, i laughed. the concept of *classics* has for some time seemed to me one more way in which *they* get to be pompous and we get robbed of our own taste: what do you *mean* you don't like *idylls* of the king? it's a *classic!* laughed —

and got intrigued. i thought of my favorite books — but what would become a classic? it seemed megalomaniacal to assume that whatever mechanism says make it, get known, sell, be heard, get requested, reprinted, endure would coincide with my personal taste.

so what is a classic?

judgement...

who decides what stays in print, what gets remaindered, what makes it into paper, onto the supermarket paperback displays, back into hardbound collected works? ... printed by whom? distributed how?...

it's not that a classic is necessarily *good* — what's *good*? it's that something large and encompassing grows from it. a classic is a book, a writer, chosen — and it is also an institution.

as an institution, a classic is hard to avoid.... we breathe it. a signpost of a culture, or one of its common foods. a classic knits a connection among people of a culture, so that many many people can respond with a kind of intimacy and knowledge.

and those who don't respond, unfamiliar with the signal or reference? a classic in a given culture always has a supportive relationship to the culture and to those empowered by that culture.

that is, a classic may praise or critique — but never ignore — what

the empowered think is important....

to the extent that lesbian culture represents the experience, insights, values and interest of most lesbians, it will have a combative relationship to those in power — because lesbians, still, are hideously oppressed.

rubyfruit jungle doesn't change this fact, although it may just

change a few minds, or give a bit of hope....

so lesbian culture — for it be *ours*, belong to and represent most lesbians — will be antipatriarchal, antiracist and anticapitalist, one cultural edge of a revolution we require.¹

i require.

a sign of the times: even among lesbians, the word *we* sounds presumptuous; the word *"revolution"* seems pretentious. these are political problems as much as linguistic observations.

this means that lesbian culture will always be in danger of repression, co-optation, and absorption in tricky ways² until such time

as lesbians have control of our own lives....

* * *

but apart from *them*, is the THEM in us, the daddy's good-girl, she-who-really-*does*-think-like-them. the fact: that whenever we are not consciously fighting against the hierarchies we were born into, we will imitate these hierarchies and reinforce the oppression of other women. but we can say this more simply; how many lesbian feminist publications are controlled by women of color? by women of working-class background or without college training? by women who are poor?...

it's a question of which lesbians will lesbian culture honor and support? whose experience will come to be represented in the books women will read years from now? which languages will be preserved—

the barbadian-brooklyn english of paule marshall's characters in brown girl, brownstones? the working class inflections of sharon is abell's yesterday's lessons?³

* * *

if i taught everyone to talk, future generations would not find a brooklyn jewish accent unpoetic or comical or hard to understand.

but if someone from the british aristocracy schools our poetic sensibilities, my voice will *never* sound classic.⁴

the questions extend to include, what kind of consciousness will women have when they pick up which books in which language representing whose experience? who will they be, choosing great/not great?...

...as a woman with access to print, i can bring women's works into the larger circle of awareness. i know that if [a] book is widely read by lesbians, and loved, and used to inspire other writings; or is critiqued and responded to in that often useful way — that's not how it was, here's my story —...some 20 to 50 years from now [it] may be considered a classic. and, conversely, if no one reads it ...

in this way i exert some small influence on the making of lesbian culture. so do any of us with access to print, publishers ... or in classrooms.

in talking of classics, then, i mean who, what will come to seem central to who we become and what our culture becomes.

and we can't know these thing yet

though we know that we will become partly through our culture; our classics will be "chosen" partly because they have made us become....

...as long as we cherish the creativity of ordinary women and value what women themselves have valued (instead of depending on a patriarchal and snobbish art establishment to determine value for us), we center exactly on the passionately egalitarian vision named in "women's liberation."

now if those who control what gets passed on are antagonistic to this vision and therefore claim that grahn's language is flat and a bit rhetorical... or that rich has lost something (clarity of form? compelling imagery) by bringing her work progressively towards clarity of thought, accessibility to the vast majority; or that walker has unfortunately fallen prey to white feminist manhating... then rich, grahn and walker may appear in literary history — if at all — as minor writers. and since "lesser" writers whose work connected with theirs will be excluded altogether, none of them will be read in a context of likeminded peers, and their work will seem eccentric rather than central; and will become marginal to the culture which passes on.⁵

conversely, if black and white feminists and lesbians confront—in life and in art—the substance of what is between us, historically and currently, separating as well as joining us, so that a genuine bior multi-racial antiracist tradition is incorporated into lesbian culture, then the relationship between meridian and lynn in alice walker's meridian; or that between lillian hellman and sophronia in an unfin-

ished woman; will be explored as painful beginnings.

or, when audre lorde tells a room full of women, many lesbians, many black women ... "your silence will not protect you," tears shock

my eyes....

we have seen again and again and again that what women — lesbians, poor women, women of color — need in order to be represented, is not special favors, but simply access to information, resources, and *space*. as asian, native american and chicana lesbians, and lesbians in the new immigrant cultures — vietnamese, cuban, haitian, and those yet to come to this country — articulate their cultures, those of us with access to feminist resources can welcome the opportunity to move on over and expand our circle; or we have betrayed our best visions.

...if we remember that some of our people lived — and live — sexless, in terror, we will be careful to expand protection for sexual freedom and honesty as we fight to rid our lives of horrible violent

offensive porn, art, junk, and other things we don't want around.... and one way to expand protection for sexual freedom is to assert it. if our culture supports and encourages explicit lesbian sex in our art, then explicitly sexual art and literature — tee corinne's work, for example — will perhaps replace exclusively floral interpretations of our cunts. june arnold's sister gin will reverberate for us not only as a celebration of female love and middle-aged sexuality and integrity but also as a depiction of explicit lesbian sexuality; as will this incredible poem of stephanie byrd's:

I can feel it in my lips My ass moves towards warmth Press warmth upon my buttocks my breasts rub my crotch the lips I am warmed, hot water in a bath I can feel breath in my throat I choke up phlegm Lick my chest, the lips Dart in to make me choke again I can feel sight in my eyes Push sight into my eyes, the eyelets I see writhing evelets clearer Eat me Eat me Eat me alive6

if we continue to self-define; to value solidarity (to revive another word with a slightly old-fashioned ring);...then lesbians will read judy grahn's a woman is talking to death a bit the way the greeks—they say—sat around listening to homer. it will be key in our culture, not just because it is (let's face it) great, but because the values it embodies will be our cultural values—and because grahn will have helped to make them ours. to remember what we do with each other was called *indecent*. to redefine *indecent*.

Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing, I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat to keep us from leaving, because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly; I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept

with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly.⁷

1. anti-imperialist as well; gertrude stein spoke perhaps more in-citefully than

she intended: "Patriarchal Poetry is the same as Patriotic poetry."

3. see judy grahn's "murdering the king's english," the introduction to vol. 1 of true to life adventure stories, ed. grahn (and the stories themselves, many of which

are written in language usually excluded from literature).

4. the first time i heard muriel rukeyser read — she was a large woman with a loud NY jewish voice — my heart sang; i realized i needed to hear her voice as i had needed to hear women's voices against a drone of male ones, the implications

of this bear on all oppressed cultures.

5. for example, tillie olsen tells of returning to writing after decades of abstention and discovering that josephine herbst (an older contemporary and another rare woman writer on the left) was out of print and virtually unknown; in her day, tillie reports, jo herbst was as popular and as major a writer as hemingway, or odets....

6. byrd, in 25 years of malcontent, good gay poets press.

7. grahn, "a woman is talking to death," reprinted in the work of a common woman.

authors and works originally referred to in this article but omitted when condensed include: toni morrison (the bluest eye; sula), alice walker (the third life of grange copeland), aphra behn, christina rosettie, h.d., maricla moyano (beginning book), ti-grace atkinson, jan clausen (after touch), lorraine bethel & barbara smith (eds, conditons: five, the black women's issue), adrienne rich (women and honor: some notes on lying), susan griffin (woman and nature), monique wittig (les guérillères), gloria hull, louise bernikow (ed., the world split open, four centuries of women poets in england and america), off our backs, heresies, azalea, the ladder, blanche boyd, joan larkin (housework), elly bulkin (ed., with larkin, of amazon poetry), olga broumas (beginning with o), sandy boucher (assaults and rituals), jane cooper (maps & windows), mary daly (gyn/ecology), melanie kaye/kantrowitz (we speak in code), tillie olsen (silences), elinor langer, mitsuye yamada (camp notes and other poems), barbara grier & coletta reid (eds., the three ladder anthologies), june arnold.

^{2.} virginia woolf pointed out that dangerous books are often absorbed into the literary canon as "children's books" — she cites *gulliver's travels* and *moby dick*; i was assigned emily dickinson's "i'm nobody" in grade school, and along with all NY public high school english students, read cather and george eliot (50s and early 60s). think about lesbian books getting shunted off onto children!

It's the Poverty

for Kim

You say to me,
"Take a drive with me
up the coast, babe
and bring your typewriter."

All the way down the coast you and she stopped at motels your typewriters tucked under your free arm dodging the rain fast to the shelter of metal awnings, red and white I imagine them — you two snorting brandy in those vinyl rooms propping your each machine onto an endtable.

This story becomes you a fiction I invent with my ears evoking heroism in the first description of the weather.

I say
my typewriter sticks in the wet.
I have been using the same ribbon
over and over and over again.
Yes, we both agree I could use
a new ribbon. But it's the poverty
the poverty of my imagination, we agree.
I lack imagination you say.

No. I lack language.

The language to clarify my resistance to the literate. Words are a war to me. They threaten my family.

To gain the word to describe the loss, I risk losing everything. I may create a monster, the word's length and body

swelling up colorful and thrilling looming over my *mother*, characterized. Her voice in the distance *unintelligible illiterate*.

These are the monster's words.

Understand.
My family is poor.
Poor. I can't afford
a new ribbon. The risk
of this one
is enough
to keep me moving
through it, accountable.
The repetition, like my mother's stories retold,
each time reveals more particulars
gains more familiarity.
You can't get me in your car so fast.

You tell me how you've learned to write while you drive how I can leave my droning machine behind for all you care.

I say , not-so-fast not so fast. The drone a chant to my ears a common blend of histories repeatedly inarticulate.

Not so fast. I am poorer than you. In my experience, fictions are for hearing about, not living.

[&]quot;It's the Poverty" was published in Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* (1983, South End Press). This is the way it appears in *Loving in the War Years*.

Racism and Writing Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics

I

Some months ago I began work on an article entitled "Homophobia and Heterosexual Feminists." I had begun the article out of a few years' accumulated anger at having to deal with homophobia in the "feminist" world of publishing, teaching, and conferences. I wrote barely two pages before that title seemed inadequate, and I stuck in the word "white" before the word "heterosexual." If I — as a white lesbian — was so invisible to these white heterosexual feminists, how much more invisible were lesbians of color. Given the general insensitivity of these writers/editors to women of color regardless of sexual and affectional preference, insisting that they deal with their homophobia confronted only part of the problem. Though my concern here is not their homophobia, it — combined with their racism — served as a catalyst for my own exploration of racism.

For in nearly every instance of homophobia I planned to cite, racism was at least as identifiable. While The Feminist Press' Out of the Bleachers: Writings on Women and Sport distinguishes itself by its total failure to include material about lesbians, it also contains a paragraph in which a white woman writer congratulates a Black woman athlete for speaking not "black lingo," but "perfectly enunciated formal English prose." The special Frontiers issue "Mothers and Daughters" and the Feminist Studies one, "A Feminist Theory of Motherhood," each includes only a single poem written from an identifiable lesbian perspective and no critical or personal articles about lesbian motherhood or co-parenthood at all. Neither contains any work about Third

World mothers.2

Ellen Moers, whose *Literary Women*: The Great Writers has been called "a model of feminist criticism" and gets cited positively at women's studies conferences, places lesbians under the heading of "freaks," considers lesbianism one of the "worst scandals" that can be attributed to a dead woman writer "under the respectable heading of literary scholarship," and lets less than a dozen lines about Lorraine Hansberry stand as her sole discussion of Third World women writers. And Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets, with the exception of Gloria T. Hull's two-page discussion of Audre Lorde,

completely ignores lesbian writers as a force in contemporary women's poetry. At the same time, it holds with stubborn perverseness to its title, despite the opening sentence of Hull's survey of Afro-American women poets: "Black women poets are not 'Shakespeare's sisters'."

I find that my almost invariable initial response to what I read and what I hear is to the issue of homophobia; then, sometimes right after, sometimes after a significant time lapse, I become aware of the existence of racism. At last fall's The Second Sex Conference: Simone DeBeauvoir 30 Years Later, I attended a workshop on women's writing led by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, editor of Feminist Studies, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, co-editors of Shakespeare's Sisters. While DuPlessis at least specified that she was speaking only about heterosexual romance, Gilbert and Gubar just spoke as if all women writers — with the exception of Alice Walker — were both heterosexual and white. Adrienne Rich was mentioned, but not as a lesbian; Alice Walker was praised, but seen only within the context of a white women's literary tradition. After some discussion, I objected to the heterosexism of the presentations and met first with embarrassed silence and then with the assurance that, of course, they were all well aware of lesbian writing — it just didn't happen to receive attention in these particular papers. Going home on the subway, I realized that I could well have objected to the white solipsism of the presentations and didn't—caught as I was in the immediacy of my anger at my own oppression. The following day, given a chance to speak at an open mike, I made the connections I had failed to make the day before.

TT

I mention this particular example as neither mea culpa nor simple success story, but as a way of beginning to look at the dynamics and socializing factors that interfere with our confronting racism, both in ourselves and in other white women. For I assume that I/we do not have to be non-racist in order to be anti-racist. For me this has been a crucial realization. As a vocal critic of heterosexism, I have been able to raise my voice confident in the knowledge that my own actions, my own words do not reflect that very bias. In taking an anti-racist position, I can make no such claim. Yet I can hardly wait to take these positions until the day when I will be free of all I have been taught about race and when I will no longer reap the benefits of having a white skin in this particular society. Increasingly, I am aware that such deferring of anti-racist actions effectively silences me.

I think it is essential that as white women, as white lesbians, we break out of that silence, that inaction, that wait for the never-never-day when we will be blameless enough to speak. In part, I see the process of doing this as investing with inescapable concreteness the concept of racism. Rich has written in "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia":

The concept of racism itself is often intellectualized by white feminists. For some, a conscientious, obligatory mention of "racism-and-classism" allows it to be assumed that deep qualitative differences in female experience have been taken into account, where in fact intellectual analysis has been trusted to do the work of emotional apprehension, which it cannot do. (We all recognize the same phenomenon where male analyses of sexism are concerned.) It is possible to make obeisance to the abstract existence of racism, even to work politically on issues of immediate concern to black and Third World women, such as sterilization abuse, out of an intellectual right-mindedness which actually distances us from the point where black and white women have to begin together. I have more than once felt anger at abstractly "correct" language wielded by self-described political feminists: a language, it seemed to me, which sprang from learned analysis rather than from that synthesis of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical thinking, which is at the core of feminist process.8

Much of what I have learned about racism comes from my participation in several anti-racism workshops, a white women's anti-racism consciousness-raising group, and a series of meetings on Black-Jewish relations. Both by recalling my own experience and listening to those of other white women, I learned how pervasive racism is in each of us and how it creeps in even when I am most conscious of avoiding it (perhaps too in this article). Yet exploring my own memories allows me to begin to undo my racism, to start to rouse from the inertia it fosters in me. Asked to recall my earliest awareness that there were differences between people of color and white people, I remembered two instances which symbolize for me some of the complexity of transcending my own racism to take clearly anti-racist positions. I recall my immigrant grandmother, who died before I was 6, referring to Black people as "schwartzes," dropping a word of Yiddish into a stream of English sentences and thereby impressing on me without further explanation that "they" (and, by extension, other people of color) were so alien to my white world that their very existence could not be acknowledged in my own language. Years

later, in the mid-fifties, I remember my parents speaking with the simple superiority of Northern liberals about civil rights for Black people in the South, and thereby impressing upon me both that prejudice was a terrible thing and that it could be defined in terms of basic civil rights and the *intellectual* concept of racial equality. For them, racism was floating around someplace out there — certainly in Birmingham and Little Rock; and if I only *believed* in the equality of all people, I would be forever safe from the corrosion in my grandmother's message.

In the past few years, I have learned better. I have not, after all, escaped. Had I not these particular stories of the origins of my racism, I would have others that would have cut equally deep. The issue, I think, is not to belabor this reality, but to explore what can, in fact, still

be done in spite of it.

If we haven't already done so, I think we need to be involved in anti-racist c-r groups. As white women, we need to use supportive formats developed by women looking at patriarchal oppression and adapt them so that we can look at how we have been taught racist attitudes and at how we perpetuate them, despite our honest desire not to do so. It seems especially insupportable for those of us who rage daily against the bias of heterosexuals and insist that they explore where they're coming from and do something about it to refuse to take the same steps with regard to racism. If we were willing to spend an evening learning how men (and nonlesbian women) oppress us, we should be willing to devote at least as much time exploring how and why we function as oppressors — and how we can stop playing that role or, at the very least, how to minimize it. In doing this we can learn too how racism circumscribes our own lives.

The other half of this self-education project involves filling the informational, cultural, political, and general historical gaps left by years of schooling that either omitted or distorted material about women/people of color. Due both to a flowering of writing by women of color and to their persistent struggle against racism and sexism to make their work visible, an increasing amount of it has been published during the past few years in both (white) feminist publications and (nonfeminist) Third World ones. While special focus issues (on racism, Third World women, Black women) have appeared in the white feminist press in the past year or so, at least as important has been the general increase in some publications of writing by women of color. At the same time, nonfeminist Third World publications (HooDoo; Callaloo, A Black South Journal of Arts and Letters; Bridge, The Asian American Perspective; De Colores, Journal of Emerging Raza Phi-

losophies) have put out issues dealing with Asian American, Black and Chicana women, while Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement has just printed a whole issue about Lorraine Hansberry. One result of multiple oppression, Third World women's general lack of access to financial resources, has drastically limited the number of Third World feminist publications, though Azalea: A Magazine for Third World Lesbians and Sojourner: A Third World Women's Research Newsletter have been appearing on an ongoing basis.

Those of us who have entirely or largely given up reading work by and/or about men will find a growing amount of woman-focused material, but ultimately will find it impossible to learn about the lives of women of color while holding to strictly separatist principles. Studying historical background alone, we will find the lives of women of color often linked, at time inextricably, with those of Third World men: in slavery; in World War II concentration camps built for Japanese-American citizens; in the government slaughter and forced settlement "reservations" of Native Americans; in land annexed (Texas and other Southwestern states) and colonized (Puerto Rico); in institutions that systematically have scorned the languages, cultures, and abilities of people of color. As the Combahee River Collective has written in "A Black Feminist Statement": "Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race." 10

Even when the perspective is non-feminist or anti-feminist, work that explores the general situation of women and men of color and the dynamics between them can be valuable, in part because it indicates the obstacles faced by women of color who are — or would be — feminists. So it can be helpful to read Shantih's "Native American Issue"; The Black Scholar's two special issues on "Blacks and the Sexual Revolution" and "The Black Sexism Debate"; Sunbury's American Born and Foreign: An Anthology of Asian American Poetry; alternate press and mass market periodicals and books by/for Third World people; and weekly or daily newspapers focusing on Third World communities. And each of these contains references to more things to read, listings of lectures and political and cultural events that are most often open to white women, if we choose to go. As the world in which women of color spend each day becomes increasingly three-dimensional to us as white lesbian-feminists, we move further and further out of the white enclave of thought and interaction in which most of us live, and begin to see its limitations—and its oppressiveness—in sharper perspective.

In addition, we have to begin much more seriously than I think we have thus far to apply anti-racist criteria to work by other white

women. In part, I see our failure to do this as an aspect of our larger failure to be seriously critical, though supportive, of each other's work. Too often we are so excited by the appearance of a work that raises important issues and is positive about (white) lesbians that we fail to consider the aspects of the book in which the author does not push far enough in her own consciousness. It is, of course, more comfortable to do this; none of us likes to be told where we have failed or not been as successful as we might; we find it difficult to resist identifying with the writer whose work we criticize (and who perhaps will then spare us when the critical tables are turned). Yet I think this approach — which can lead to puffing or sliding over serious problems because they seem too volatile to discuss — shows little respect for our ability to learn and grow as a result of serious criticism.

A few years ago, in an interview I did and then edited, Adrienne Rich referred to an anthology that "included blacks and other minorities; but women and homosexuals were not included." Though it was certainly not her conscious intent — nor mine in editing the interview — the wording sets up blacks and other minorities and women and homosexuals as separate groups and makes the existence of Black women or Hispanic lesbians a verbal impossibility. The appropriate criticism that we received from Flying Clouds as a result helped sensitize us to the issues involved. A consequence of the criticism was my own increased ability to monitor my own work for racist language and assumptions. Talking about criticism in that same interview, Rich has said: "We need a kind of pointing toward what isn't being dealt with, what is creating silences and evasions . . . We don't explore our capacity until we're challenged." 12

Those of us who feel frustrated by the continual failure of all but a handful of nonlesbian women to speak out on issues of homophobia need to ourselves challenge racism and not leave it to be the task of women/lesbians of color, one that all too often remains undone if they are absent. Those of us who automatically flip to the table of contents or to a book's index to see if lesbians are included need to teach ourselves to look automatically for the inclusion of women of color; if we check whether "homophobia" is in the index, we need to look for "racism" too. When we edit work, we need to do active outreach for work by women of color, rather than waiting for them to take the first step. It is not ok to run a special lesbian issue (as *Heresies* has done) that is all white or to acknowledge that "lesbians and women of color are not adequately represented," as *Frontiers* has done most recently in an issue devoted to "Who Speaks for the Women's

Movement?" when, in fact, we/they are not represented at all; nor is it acceptable for *Frontiers* to run a lesbian history issue which includes a questionnaire response from a Black lesbian and a short performance piece by an Asian-American lesbian — who is *not* included in the table of contents — as its only recognition of the herstory of lesbians of color. While it is crucial to include work by women of color, we should not leave it to them alone to raise issues of racism and to explore the implications of any issue for women of color. The responsibility for doing this lies also with us as white women.

III

As critics — and readers — we must not forget the vital interconnection between words and the everyday of women's lives. Minnie Bruce Pratt makes this connection in her lengthy letter to *Chrysalis* protesting Carol Fox Schmucker's "Has Anyone Read *Gone with the Wind* Lately?" which discusses Scarlett O'Hara as "a strong, active, *alive* woman with a very healthy self-love" in a novel "filled with powerful women, including older women who serve as role models." At the end of her article, Schmucker talks briefly about *GWTW* as a racist novel, whose author's "racial consciousness . . . *mars* her vision" (my emphasis) but which has, nonetheless, "been kept alive by its appeal to women." Speaking as a Southern white woman who grew up in the fifties, Pratt writes:

When the movie Gone with the Wind came to my hometown every four years during my girlhood, I would go down to the Ritz, stare at the posters where Vivien swooned against Clark in vivid tempura colors, pay my 25¢ and go into the theater through the swinging door to the left of the ticket booth. To the right of the booth was another door; it led up steep stairs to the balcony where the black people of the town sat when they came to the movies. Schmucker's failure to discuss forthrightly the racism in GWTW makes me think of that balcony. She cites comments from other sources (A. Rich, A.F. Scott) to prove that Southern white women have positive attitudes toward black women and men. She does not point out that by 1936, the year of GWTW's publication, black women and men were still being lynched both in the South and elsewhere (see "Lynching" in the NY Times Index, 1930-) and that Mitchell reproduces the very excuses used by lynch mobs to justify their actions... In chapter 37, when Scarlett hears of the rise of Klan activity during Reconstruction and of the black man murdered by a white "gentleman," supposedly in defense of white women, Scarlett is said to feel for the first time "a kinship with the people about her." ... She identifies with

the determination of *the men* that the South was "too dear a homeland to be turned over to ignorant Negroes drunk with whiskey and freedom." Mitchell, in writing a "historical" romance that condones the worst actions of racism, actions that continued at the very time of her writing, evades a struggle with significant moral issues. She, like her heroine Scarlett, participates in, and agrees with, the immoral actions of white men. Can we then discuss Mitchell as an author of a "serious piece of work?" . . . To fail to see that *GWTW* offers us a heroine who is reactionary, not revolutionary, to fail to see in what was Mitchell's endorsement of racism may have actually increased or sustained the novel's appeal to white women readers, is to continue to accept this racism. ¹⁶

Pratt continues:

If we read *GWTW* now, we should consider that this fall people participating in an anti-Klan rally in Greensboro, North Carolina, were gunned down by the Klan and six, black and white, were killed (AP, 11/6/79). A woman who was married to one of the killers said, "I knew he was in the Klan, but I don't know what he did when he left home." If we are white women, we must ask what is going on outside our "home," outside our familiar, accustomed view. To analyze *GWTW* as if the racial and sexual attitudes that are expressed in it no longer exist is to evade a moral responsibility, just as Margaret Mitchell did.

I have quoted Minnie Bruce Pratt's letter at such length because it seems to me to model the type of anti-racist criticism that I think we —as white lesbians who are feminists — need to do more of. She takes her early life and *uses* it as a means of analyzing racism and filling in the gaps left in Schmucker's description of the white Southern female response to *GWTW*. She incorporates an analysis of the impact of racism into her evaluation of Scarlett, GWTW as a whole, and the white Southern response to it, rather than tacking it on as something of an afterthought, a rather unpleasant fact that must be acknowledged someplace in the article without interfering with its overall thesis.

Equally important, I think, she has taken the responsibility as a white woman to "ask what is going on outside our 'home,' outside our familiar, accustomed view." As a result, she is able to bring to her analysis the kind of *informed* critical sense that allows her to place both the book and the article in a concrete historical context of lynching and other forms of white terrorism. By having learned that history, she is able to approach racism in terms of its very real connection to people's lives, not as an abstraction which it is somehow "good" to oppose.

In fact, Minnie Bruce Pratt responded to the *Chrysalis* article shortly after the Greensboro killings and while her students were writing their responses to them. In a letter to me, she wrote about that experience:

One of the older black women in my freshman comp class (in her forties) delayed and delayed handing in the assignment on the Klan. She discussed with me how writing about her experience brought backdreadful memories and anger and pain and she didn't want to bring it all up. She finally turned the paper in — it told of her family being driven off land that they had owned for five generations — and implied that she had seen her mother raped, perhaps beaten by the Klan — told of her responsibility as the oldest for hiding the other children during the Klan visits when her mother pleaded with them to leave, but they came and searched the house — watching them tramp through from her hiding place. (December 29, 1979)

Even as this description helps put into perspective both Schmucker's article and *Chrysalis*' decision to print it, it also underscores the extent to which racism and sexism are interconnected. Whereas the rape of the student's mother was possible because she was a woman, the specific attack—the entry of her house by the Klan—took place only because she was Black.

I see Pratt's response to the Schmucker article as emerging from a consciousness honed by her own openness to the type of concrete experience she mentions in her letter to me. It emerges, in part, from what Rich has described as crossing "barriers of age and condition... sensing our way into another's skin, if only in a moment's apprehension." If we accept the premise that writing — our own and others'—can both reflect and perpetuate racism, if we know — or know of — women of color who have been deeply hurt by racist writing by white people, including white lesbian-feminists, the impetus for developing and applying anti-racist criteria becomes compelling.

IV

When I first picked up Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* in galleys nearly a year and a half ago, I found myself in full agreement with her that "the oppression of women knows no ethnic, national, or religious bounds," that it is, in short, "planetary." ¹⁸ I agreed too that *all* facets of this oppression should be thoroughly researched and strenuously opposed. Still, I was concerned with her use of white Western sources that seemed likely to be, for the most part, not just sexist but also racist, and about her avoidance of race and class as substantive issues in her chapter on American gynecology. Ultimately

I felt that her failure to consider the biases in many of her sources and to explore more than tentatively the ways in which race and class influence the nature and extent of women's oppression seriously undercuts the effectiveness of her argument and the reliability of her research.

I waited patiently for feminist reviews that would, in some way, reflect my concerns. But, except for Mariana Valverde's comment in Canada's *The Body Politic* that Daly "is quite insensitive to the peculiarities of ethnic groups and historical periods," none appeared. ¹⁹ Instead, review after review in feminist periodicals sounded the same note. In off our backs, Susanna J. Sturgis wrote:

Gyn/Ecology is written to us, for us, from our experience, about us, the untamed, the Hags ... *Gyn/Ecology*, this wonderful, brilliant, amazing Hysterical book, spins itself beyond the words that Mary Daly wrote. It is a creation, the work of a revolutionary feminist; it is a vision of strength and integrity of sisterhood.²⁰

And Susan Leigh Star said in Sinister Wisdom:

This book is the total confluence of method and content, of the personal and the historical, of the reach for change and the unflinching examination of suffering, that I have come to know as feminism. Where this book is, there is feminism ... ²¹

The critical word — lesbian feminist variety — was in, and *Gyn/Ecology* receded into the recent past as a Great Event in lesbian-feminist history.

The reviews upset me. Only my discussions with other lesbian-feminists I know prevent me from discounting my own perceptions — my own decision *not* to "gynuflect" — as some sort of craziness on my part. The issue, it seems to me, goes far beyond the book itself to its implications for the lesbian community, especially the lesbian writing community. Will we accept as a veritable sacred text a theoretical book written by a white lesbian feminist that excludes the concerns about racism expressed repeatedly by Third World feminists?²²

I am, for example, disturbed as I read through the Second Passage chapters on Indian suttee, Chinese footbinding, and African genital mutilation by Daly's almost entirely uncritical use of white Western sources, nearly all male, and by her failure to acknowledge the racism both in passages she quotes in Gyn/Ecology and in those she omits from her book. Although she finally does discuss the "unabashed" (172) racism of Dark Rapture: The Sex Life of the African Negro, she consistently ignores possible racist bias in her focus on the plight of women (who are, after all, both female and Third World).

She cites, for instance, the words of Joseph Campbell on Indian suttee or widow-burning:

In spite of the suffering and even panic in the actual moment of the pain of suffocation, we should certainly not think of the mental state and experience of these individuals after any model of our own more or less imaginable reactions to such a fate. For these sacrifices were not properly, in fact, individuals at all; that is to say, they were not particular beings, distinguished from a class or group by virtue of any sense or realization of a personal, individual destiny of responsibility. (116-17)

Daly comments: "I have not italicized any of the words in this citation because it seemed necessary to stress *every* word. It is impossible to make any adequate comment." (117) While adequate comment is certainly difficult to make, Daly consistently focuses in these chapters on the incredible misogyny of men *to the exclusion* of anything else, including the potential racism of her sources. So the bias in Campbell's perception of *our* "reactions," the reactions of white Westerners, as innately different from those of Asians slips through Daly's pages without comment. I have heard too many Hollywood and television descriptions of Japanese kamikaze pilots, Chinese "hordes" invading North Korea, and "fanatically" single-minded (North) Vietnamese which assume that "life is cheap in the Orient — they don't value life as much as we do" not to recognize this particular racist attitude when I read it.

Yet Daly is not through discussing Campbell. She writes:

After describing the live burial of a young widow which took place in 1818, this devotee of the rites of de-tached scholarship describes the event as "an illuminating, though somewhat appalling, glimpse into the deep, silent pool of the Oriental, archaic soul [emphases Daly's].... What eludes the scholar is the fact that the "archaic soul" was a woman's destroyed by Patriarchal Religion (in which he is a true believer), which demands female sacrifice. (119)

Here her objection is *explicitly* to the misogyny which is both clearly present and appalling. But Daly does not confront the other half of the bias evident in Campbell's words, which reveal someone who believes in the stereotype of the "inscrutable Oriental" ("deep, silent pool of the Oriental, archaic soul").

The existence of this racism in Daly's sources *in no way* mitigates the woman-hating. ButIdo question chapters that cite source after source written about women *of color* by men who are white and Western with no overall look by the author at what their whiteness, their Western

background, the racism of their anthropological field, mean in their reports of these atrocities.

Even more disturbing in certain ways is Daly's failure to mention the incredibly blatant racism of American writer Katherine Mayo. Daly uses *Mother India* (1927) as a source for her discussion of Indian child brides who are forced to marry, have intercourse, and bear children. Daly describes the book by the American writer as "an excellent work" (119) which occasioned the strenuous attack from women-hating critics. "Feminist Seekers/Spinsters," she writes, "should search out and claim such sisters as Katherine Mayo . . . We must learn to name our true sisters . . . In the process of seeking out these sister Seekers/Spinsters, it is essential to look at *their own* writing" (emphasis Daly's, 129-30), rather than at their male detractors'.

So I looked at *Mother India* itself. And found Mary Daly doing to Third World people exactly what she (accurately) charges men of doing to women. In a reference to a misogynist writer who discusses Chinese footbinding, Daly says: "The author either concurs in the erasure or didn't notice it. All of this boils down to about the same thing: doublethink or de-tachment from women's oppression" (144). In Daly's non-response to Mayo's racism, in her wholehearted lauding of her book, we have an analogous phenomenon. Early in her

book, Mayo writes:

The British administration of India, be it good, bad, or indifferent, has nothing whatever to do with the conditions above indicated. Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself — all traits that truly characterize the Indian not only of today, but of long-past history. All, furthermore, will continue to characterize him in increasing degree, until he admits their causes and with his own two hands uproots them. No agency but a new spirit within his own breast can set him free. ²³

Indians are, Mayo says on the next page, "a huge population, mainly rural, illiterate, and *loving their illiteracy*" (my emphasis). ²⁴ In *Mother India*'s third chapter, "Slave Mentality," Mayo maintains:

The whole pyramid of the Hindu's woes, material and spiritual — poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness, not forgetting that subconscious conviction of inferiority which he forever bares and advertises by his gnawing and imaginative alertness to social affronts — rests upon a rock-bottom physical base. This base is, simply, his manner of getting into the world [as offspring of a child bride] and his sex-life thenceforward [my emphasis]. 25

You can "find them," Mayo concludes the chapter, "at the age when the Anglo-Saxon is just coming into full glory of manhood, brokennerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients; and need you, while this remains unchanged, seek for other reasons why they are poor and sick and dying and why their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or to hold the reins of government?" ²⁶

These words were written thirty years before Indian independence, after centuries of British rule, and during a decade when American immigration laws were increasingly being tightened to keep out Asians and other "non-Anglo-Saxons." If Mayo's words are those of a "true sister," whom I/we "should search out and claim," Daly and I certainly have different standards. While the societally supported practice that Mayo reveals of taking child brides who are then forced to have intercourse by their husbands is unquestionably loathesome, it can hardly explain "the whole pyramid of the Hindu's woes." I do not know, of course, whether Daly read the comments by Mayo without registering them as racist or whether she consciously chose not to include them in her discussion of *Mother India*. But the result is effectively the same: judgment offered, information presented, as if racism were beyond notice, beneath mention.

Another kind of "erasure" occurs in Daly's chapter on American gynecology, in which she seems to me equally unwilling to admit and explore the extent to which women of color and poor women of all races are victims of white male professionals. Repeatedly in this chapter, Daly has the opportunity to use "graphic and detailed material" to describe "the horrible physical reality" (150) of the impact on women of color and poor women of the white, male gynecological establishment. Writing about G. Marion Sims, a nineteenth-century gynecologist, she says: "He began his life's work 'humbly,' performing dangerous sexual surgery on black female slaves housed in a small building in his yard" (225). In a note at the bottom of the page, she states: "Mary Smith, an Irish indigent, suffered thirty of his operations between 1856 and 1859. The black slave Anarcha had suffered the same number in his backyard stable a decade before" (225). This information is, in itself, upsetting. Yet that "graphic" detail that Daly correctly berates male scholars for omitting when writing about footbinding is conspicuously absent here. Daly's source, G.J. Barker-Benfield's The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America, is far more explicit:

Although anesthesia had first been invented at the time (the 1840s), Sims did not know of it ... His first patients endured years of almost

unbelievable agonies ... Sims scoured the countryside for appropriate surgical subjects. Significantly, given the need for their endurance, passivity, and utter helplessness, they were black female slaves, some of whom Sims bought expressly for his experiments that is, when the owner was skeptical about Sims' methods. He built his own private hospital in his backyard to house them. Rumors circulated in Montgomery that Sims was using human beings as guinea pigs for his surgical ambitions. The rumors were accurate. As long as he was in Montgomery, "it was far harder to operate on white women than on Negroes" because white women were more in a position to express their will in the relationship with Sims. "The pain was so terrific that Mrs. H. could not stand it and I was foiled completely." So the black slaves served as "adequate material" in Sims' "storing" of experience, "finding out more about the applicability of ... silver sutures" until the invention of anesthesia and of Listerism dissolved the resistance of wealthy white women and Sims could apply to their bodies the techniques he had perfected on the bodies of blacks.27

Daly's characterization of his practices as "brutal" (225) seems hardly adequate to describe these series of operations *done without anesthesia* on women who because of their race and consequent slave status or their combined poverty and recent immigrant status had no recourse. I was, quite simply, shocked that, while Daly is perfectly willing to numb the reader with the agonies of women of color in other countries, she seems consistently reluctant to do so closer to home.

This pattern of mentioning American women of color and poor women as gynecological guinea pigs and *immediately* insisting that their race and/or class is not pivotal in their selection (or that they are not the "intended" targets), and then moving onto a discussion of white middle-class women ultimately erases race and class as significant. Daly writes:

This blatant statement legitimates the use of women as uninformed guinea pigs for such drugs as The Pill and the morning-after pill. The temptation might be to imagine that such destructive experimentation is confined to a particular time (the past) or to particular segments of the female population (e.g., low-income and nonwhite). While the latter are victimized in a special way, their "higher-class" sisters are taken care of in a different way. Thus well-educated (mis-educated) upper-middle-class women who "willingly" subject themselves (are subjected) to mutilating surgery and estrogen replacement therapy are uninformed objects in a refined sense. (my emphasis, 259)

Daly's use of parallel terms and the verbal speed with which she moves from poor women and women of color to middle-class women (overwhelmingly white) is remarkable. Her parallel phrases ("in a special way" and "in a different way") give equal weight to the oppression of each group and has the ultimate effect of ignoring the suffering of women that is determined/affected by their race and/or

degree of economic privilege.

Rather than detailing this suffering, Daly moves on to a string of statistics which, though informational, lack the immediacy which concrete examples could bring to her study — and which she is perfectly willing to use in her discussions of Chinese, Indian, and African women. Here, as elsewhere in her chapter on American gynecology, she follows the admission that women of color and poor women are "targeted" (269) for sterilization only with statistics and an immediate disclaimer: "It would be simplistic, however," Daly writes, "to conclude that poor women are the essential targets of the *intent* of gynecological gynocide" (emphasis Daly's, 270).

Daly's leveling of difference — even after her brief verbal acknowledgment of it — finds no support in the work done by feminist healthcare workers and researchers, as reflected in the monthly health news columns and regular articles in off our backs and other women's periodicals; the publications of such groups as CARASA (Committee against Restrictions on Abortion and Sterilization Abuse), CESA (Committee to End Sterilization Abuse), Feminist Alliance against Rape, and Women Free Women in Prison; the writings of such Daly sources as Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English; material listed in the syllabus on Black women's healthcare put together by Beverly Smith; and in other feminist health publications. 28 Since extensive, thoroughly detailed feminist material demonstrates overwhelmingly the degree to which women of color and poor women of all races are used as medical guinea pigs in ways that (predominantly white) middle- and upper-class women are not, I fail to understand why Daly chooses not to document their sufferings in this chapter. I cannot help but wonder about the connection between the absence of serious recognition of this situation and the validity of Daly's contention that "the potential object of such studies is Everywoman" (259).

I find that the erasures in Daly's book ultimately form a pattern. For that reason, I think it worthwhile to consider these many examples. They are not isolated, random omissions. Daly writes with regard to male scholarship of how "pattern-detecting — the development of a kind of positive paranoia — is essential for every feminist Searcher, so that she can resist the sort of mind-poisoning to which she must expose herself in the very process of seeking out necessary informa-

tion" (125). While we should follow her advice and develop "pattern-detecting" with regard to all forms of gynocidal patriarchy, we should also consistently apply such criteria, as she does not, with regard to racism and classism. They too are forms of "mind-poisoning." The kind of overall pattern that I detect in *Gyn/Ecology*, one that can only be described accurately as racist, compels, I think, a reevaluation of the book as a whole.

V

If, as white feminists, we prefer to ignore the pervasiveness of racist oppression in the lives of women of color and to see women — or lesbians alone — as a fairly homogeneous group, our preference emerges directly from our white-skin privilege. If I can go through a whole day without a sharp awareness of racism, if I can put together — or think someone else can put together — a viable piece of feminist criticism or theory whose base is the thought and writing of white women/lesbians and expect that an analysis of racism can be tacked on or dealt with later as a useful addition, it is a measure of the extent

to which I partake of that white privilege.

We need instead writing/criticism that signals that we have been listening to women of color and understanding what they experience. Examples of racist incidents abound. My morning paper carries an article about two white California men convicted of randomly killing a deaf Black man because they hadn't shot a deer on their hunting trip; the white woman who had accompanied them had already been convicted of second-degree murder. In the course of their spree, one of the convicted men "tried to shoot at three black men standing by a truck, but their rifle misfired. He then tried to shoot a young black woman in the face ... but missed at point-blank range."29 Spared by luck, the young woman was clearly a victim of racism, not of gynocidal patriarchy (though, perhaps on another day, that too will target her). She just happened to be a woman. Her race and her near-victim status, however, were no accident. Nor was the slain Black man saved because of his male sex. The incident has its countless parallels in communities of people of color all over the United States - and, where white people have power, elsewhere in the world. Truly a planetary phenomenon.

The interconnectedness of oppressions — rather than their "hierarchy" — in the lives of women of color gets stressed in the Combahee

River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement":

We ... often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as a racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of black women by white men as a weapon of political oppression.³⁰

The development of feminist theory and criticism by white women that incorporates this type of ongoing recognition of the role of racism in the lives of all women of color and of economic powerlessness in the lives of the vast majority of them is a requisite for truly empowering ourselves as feminists. We can, of course, see this kind of inclusion in negative terms — we don't want to oppress women of color. But we can see it far better as a positive step that underscores a healthy growth and complexity in a feminist vision of change for *all* women, not just for white middle-class ones.

VI

It might be helpful, in attempting to develop such an anti-racist approach, to begin to work out a list of guideline questions that, although open-ended, can help us formulate a critical position toward what we write and what we read. I developed the following specifically with non-fiction prose and collections of prose in mind, though it would be important also to formulate such questions in relationship to other genres and collections. Though my list is necessarily incomplete, I hope it will serve as a starting point in the development of a comprehensive one:

Representation

— To what extent are works included by women of color who represent different racial and cultural backgrounds?

— Are women of color represented by work dealing with race and racism *and* with topics not *primarily* focused on race (relationships with family, sexuality, work, aging, etc.)?

—Does work by white women consider the implications of their

subjects for women of color?

Audience

— Does the writer make any assumptions about the race of her audience and, if so, what implications do they have for women of color?

Language

— Does she use terms connecting "black" to evil and negativity (blacklist, blackout, black sheep; "it was a black day for her when

her mother died") and "white" to goodness and innocence (white lie, whitewash)?

— Does she use terms to describe people of color that assume whiteness to be the norm (i.e., nonwhite)?

Critical Attitudes/Assumptions

- Does she give equal value to women of color and white women?
- When she speaks about "women," "lesbians," "feminists," are her statements applicable to white women and women of color?
- Does she recognize the differences in experience between women of color and white women?
- Does she recognize differences among various racial and cultural groups (i.e., Puerto Ricans, Chicanas, Cuban-American) and among individual members of each group?
- Does she consider the class implications of being a woman of color in a country where white people/men have the economic power?
- Does she incorporate race and racism into her analysis/evaluation or simply mention/list it?
- Does she acknowledge the effect of race and/or class privilege?
- How does she perceive women of color who have defined their political commitment in terms of their own Third World community/people?
- Does she show an awareness of the impact of racism on men of color?
- Does she show an understanding and knowledge of the historical framework in which racism has developed and of the histories of different groups of people of color in this country?
- Does she show an awareness of her own limitations as a white woman in discussing women of color and racism?
- How does she view women of color who do not speak "standard" (white, middle-class) English?

Sources

- Has she considered the racial and cultural background of the author of any sources she has used in terms of possible racial bias?
- Do her sources accurately reflect the experiences and perceptions of women/people of color?
- Has she used sources written by women of color (and men of color if she is using male sources) and observed any differences in approach and perception between Third World and white sources?

— Has she been creative and persistent in finding sources reflecting the experience of women of color when such sources were not immediately available to her?

— Does she show an awareness of work done in her field by women of color and include that work in her bibliography?

VII

I am certainly under no illusion that developing and applying such criteria is a simple matter. As I venture out in the guise of an antiracist critic, I cannot help but know how open to countercharge I leave myself — by white women expressing their own anti-racist concerns and perhaps seeing far more clearly than I; by women of color who understand the issues as I cannot and will necessarily see me as "representing the group" oppressing them. Their right — their obligation — to raise their own criticism of what I say or fail to say is undeniable. It emphasizes, in fact, the crucial issue of accountability. On all levels, the options are clear: to remain passive and silent or to act with the awareness that doing so is a necessary business.

The option to speak out now finds support in recent anti-racist writing by other white lesbians: Carol Ann Douglas' "Impressions and Confessions about Racism"; Deb Friedman's "Rape, Racism and Reality"; Minnie Bruce Pratt's letter to *Chrysalis*; Adrienne Rich's "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia"; Mab Segrest's "Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness"; the contributions of white women to *Top Ranking: A Collection of Essays on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community*. And behind them stand the anti-racist poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, the essays

and fiction of Lillian Smith, the novels of Jo Sinclair.33

As feminists standing outside the patriarchal worldview, as lesbians standing outside the circle that all but the exceptional non-lesbian has drawn about herself, we have learned much about the chasm between intentions and acts. As feminists, as lesbians, as white-skinned people in a racist society, we can read Adrienne Rich's words from several perspectives:

I try to understand
he said
what will you undertake
she said
will you punish me for history
he said

what will you undertake she said 34

Put in a context other than its original one, but still framing a dialogue between oppressor and oppressed, her poem can be seen to ask us — as white lesbian-feminists committed to anti-racism — the most basic of questions: What will we undertake?

A Note about Language: Throughout my article I use the terms "Third World women" and "women of color" interchangeably as positive terms adopted by such women themselves. I find myself in something of a politico-linguistic transition period: usage of "women of color" is increasing, though it is still used more by feminists in the Western U.S. than in the East, where I live. Perhaps in a few years we will have a more generally agreed-upon term. In addition, it is important to recognize that "women of color," especially Latina women — who belong to no single racial group — can be a white-skinned as I am, while still being victims of racism. My characterization of other women and myself as "white" refers, in fact, to a complicated intersection of racial and ethnic identity. The term "Third World" on the other hand seems to imply the priority of "first" and "second" worlds in which white people form the majority. Though it is not my subject, I think it important within the framework of my topic to acknowledge the complexity of the language I/we use.

NOTES

1. Pat Jordan, "Sweet Home: Willye B. White," Out of the Bleachers, ed. Stephanie L. Twin (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press and McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 86. For a copy of the petition protesting the book's racism and homophobia and a letter written by Rena Grasso Patterson and me in response to the press' reply to the petition, see Matrices, vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1980), pp. 3-5.

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3. Ellen G. Hawkes, "Private Female Resentments" (review of Literary Women), Ms., vol. 5, no. 1 (July 1976), p. 104. A blurb on the inside cover of the paperback edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1977) quotes Tillie Olsen as saying: "Authoritatively establishes the scope, depth, variety, of literature written by women."

4. Moers, pp. 164, 166.

5. Moers, p. 220.

6. Moers, p. xviii. For Alice Walker's comments on Moers' discussion of Hansberry, see "One Child of One's Own: An Essay on Creativity," Ms., vol. 7, no. 2 (August 1979), pp. 72-73. See also Gloria Hull, "Afro-American Women Poets: A Bio-Critical Survey," Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets. ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 181.

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1979), p. 11: reprinted in Top Ranking: Klein, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Sojourner (May 1979), p. 11; reprinted in Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community, ed. Sara Bennett and Joan Gibbs (Brooklyn: February 3rd press, 1980).

10. Combahee River Collective, in Capitalist Patriarchy: A Case for Socialist Feminism, ed. Zillah Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 365.

11. Elly Bulkin, "An Interview with Adrienne Rich: Part I," Conditions: One (April

1977), p. 59. 12. Bulkin, "An Interview with Adrienne Rich: Part II," Conditions: Two (October

1977), p. 62.

13. "Lesbian Art and Artists," Heresies 3 (Fall 1977); Editorial Collective, "To Our Readers," vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1979), p. iv; "Lesbian History Issue," Frontiers, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 1979). See Barbara Smith's responses in Judith Schwartz' "Questionnaire on Issues in Lesbian History," pp. 1-12; and Christine Wong's "Yellow Queer," p. 53.

14. Schmucker, Chrysalis 9 (Fall 1979) pp. 63, 64.

15. Schmucker, p. 69.

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17. "Disloyal to Civilization," p. 307.

- 18. Daly, Gyn/Ecology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 111. All page references are to this edition.
- 19. Valverde, "Beyond Equal Rights: Mary Daly's Gynocentric Vision," The Body Politic (October 1979), p. 32.

20. Sturgis, review of "Gyn/Ecology," off our backs (March 1979), pp. 18-19. 21. Star, "To Dwell among Ourselves," Sinister Wisdom 8 (1979), pp. 87-88. 22. For the response of a Black lesbian-feminist to Gyn/Ecology, see Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," May 6, 1979; printed in Top Ranking.

23. Katherine Mayo, Mother India (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), p. 16.

24. Mayo, p. 17.

25. Mayo, p. 22. Mayo takes her chapter title from a reference to the British "to whose oppressive presence the Indian attributes what he himself describes as the 'slave mentality' of 247,000,000 human beings" (p. 21).

26. Mayo, p. 32.

27. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 101. In her review of Daly's book, Joanna Russ says: "This section would be more telling if Daly remembered to remind us that J. Marion Sims . . . [operated] without anesthesia" (her emphasis); Frontiers, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1979), p. 69. However, she does

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28. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979) and, for a detailed discussion of the dumping in Third World countries of drugs even the FDA thought unsafe for American women, Barbara Ehrenreich, Mark Dowie, Stephen Minkin, "The Charge: Gynocide / The Accused: The U.S. Government," Mother Jones (November 1979); Beverly Smith, "Black Women's Health: A syllabus," unpublished (I am grateful to Beverly Smith for sending me a copy of the syllabus and annotated bibliography.)

29. Wallace Turner, "2 White Men Get 25 Years in Random Murder of a Black," New

York Times (February 28, 1980), p. 16A.

30. Combahee River Collective, p. 365.

31. Nancy Hoffman writes in "White Woman, Black Women: Inventing an Adequate Pedagogy": "Only sometimes will your own anti-racism and your solidarity with other women protect you from representing the group oppressing black women"; Women's Studies Newsletter, vol. 5, nos. 1 and 2 (Winter/Spring 1977), p. 22.

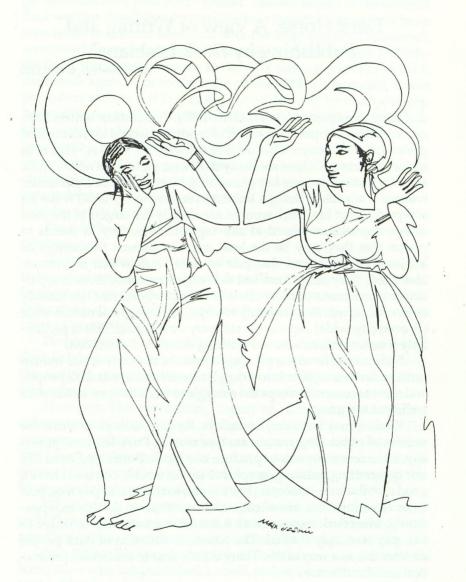
32. Douglas, off our backs (November 1979), pp. 16-17, 20; Friedman, Quest (Summer

1979), pp. 40-52; Segrest, *Feminary*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979), pp. 28-43.

33. See, for example, Muriel Rukeyser's "The Trial" (part 3 of "The Lynchings of Jesus") about the 1931 Scottsboro trial; Lillian Smith's essays in The Winner Names the Age (1978), edited by Michelle Cliff; Jo Sinclair's The Changelings (1955), as well as her political (and positive) depiction of Debby, the lesbian in Wasteland (1946).

34. Rich, "From an Old House in America," Poems, Selected and New, 1950-1974 (New

York: Norton, 1975), p. 243.



And Brazil Danced with Africa, 1972 Max Dashú (#33, 1987)

Dark Horse: A View of Writing and Publishing by Dark Lesbians*

(Revised 1991, © 1991 LJB)

During these past four years (1976-1980), dark lesbian writers have made a definite impact on womyn's literature. I would use, as my first priority, dark womyn who are lesbians who are writers. This is of major importance. There are many dark womyn writers whose work appears, but readers are left wondering whether or not a particular womon is a lesbian. Being a lesbian in society today (still) is not an accepted fact of life. Dark womyn are already the targets of the most serious oppressions aimed at any segment of society. It stands to reason that they may be the least eager to present themselves as lesbians. Or to present that part of their work which is womon-identified. They sometimes feel safe exploring themselves in a particular small community or circle of friends where trust has already been established. But, for many womyn, the thought of nation-wide (or even city-wide) exposure is still very threatening. This is particularly true for writers who are working in isolated situations.

Not coming from the privileged roots of the early white lesbian writers, dark womyn have to struggle to write and live as dark people, and *also* as womyn. Perhaps the struggle to write as open lesbians, as

well, was too great.

While it may be easier, nowadays, for dark womyn to write, the politics of publishing remain another matter. Dark lesbians, generally, have few resources to produce our work. Publishing costs \$\$\$ (for typesettting, printing, graphic & layout work). You must have a good distributor—to contact bookstores; to collect and pay fees, bills—or have the time, knowledge and resources to do this independently. Most dark womyn work full time at another job in order to eat, pay rent, stay clothed. The economic situation of dark people dictates this as a way of life. There is little time to undertake production and distribution.

^{*} A "dark horse" candidate in the political arena is one who comes from behind, unexpectedly building support, ultimately winning the race.

In the past few years, existing womyn's and lesbian-oriented publications have produced "special" issues devoted to the work of dark womyn. The things featured in these "special" issues have been wonderful to see and read. But, after the issue has been circulated, womyn whose work is included are rarely heard from again. Publishers don't retain commitments to the dark womyn writer to publish their work again — or to share the profits (\$\$\$ or otherwise). These publishers seem to feel they have "done their part" by producing the "special" issue in the first place. In addition, the politics of having to (in most cases) give up control—artistic and otherwise—of the work, have had a substantial number of articles and creative work by dark womyn accepted for publication, whose major bodies have ended up on the floors of editing rooms: Edited by publishers (who possibly do not understand the message or focus of the work), for "clarity." Nothing really changes.

Dark lesbian literature speaks of cultural identification and

celebration.

Poetry, following the oral and rhythmic traditions, is what dark lesbians are writing most of these days. The imagery, tone, color and freedom of poetry may appeal more, at this time, to dark womyn than other styles of writing. Cultural and linguistic traditions have deep roots in poetic style.

Performing written work (readings, theatre) is also an area where dark lesbians are heavily concentrated. The excitement of combining the written, oral and visual goes beyond definitions of art and performance — letting the audience become celebrants, as well.

However, the performing aspect of dark womyn's literary achievement is often praised, while the literary *merit* is ignored. The performance of a particular individual or group is lauded with words that have a condescending twist — that play heavily on racist stereotypes of dark people being talented only at "dancing and singing," or having to do with our sense of "natural rhythm."

While poetry and performance may be the easiest things to see right now, there are a substantial number of dark lesbians who are novelists, critics, journalists, political theorists, and playwrights.

Ann Allen Shockley is the first dark lesbian — who admits to being so — who has published a novel, to date (Ann Allen Shockley, Loving Her, Avon, 1978).

Writing and performing groups and work collectives have been formed by dark womyn to deal with the different aspects of writing/

publishing. A partial list follows, based on my knowledge, being centered in the northeastern USA. The network is new, and developing.

Writing and Performing Groups

Naps, Black lesbian performing ensemble, NYC. Flamboyant Ladies Theatre Co., Bklyn, NY.

Study Group on Black Lesbians, NYC.

Political Groups with Newsletters/Position Papers

Lesbians of Color Caucus newsletter, Seattle, Washington.

Lesbians of Color Newsletter, San Diego, CA.

Salsa-Soul Sisters, 3rd World Women's Gayzette, Flushing, NY.

Combahee River Collective, Cambridge, Mass.

Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman, NJ.

National Coalition of Black Gays, Columbia, MD.

Publications

Azalea: a magazine for 3rd World Lesbians, quarterly, NYC. Jemima: From the Heart, poems, Bklyn, NY.

Brown Sister, publication by dark womyn, includes writing by

dark lesbians, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.

Conditions: Five, the Black Women's Issue, includes writing by Black lesbians, edited by Black lesbian-feminists, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel, Bklyn, NY.

Joan Gibbs, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, poetry and a prose piece, February 3rd Press, NYC, 1979.

Robin Christian, Lady, These Are for You, poems, NYC, 1978.

Rose Marulanda, *Toni | A New Day | Death*, poems, Bklyn, NY. Linda Brown, *To Be More Real*, poems, NYC, 1976; *Kiwi*, journal,

Violence, Victimization, Violation*

Feminists first focused on overt violence against wimmin in pornography and rape—the rapidly increasing imagery of dismemberment, slaughter, cannibalism in porn, the widespread male linguistic and conceptual merging of violence and sex, the predictable increase of assault and mutilation — in response to the heterosexist charge that if wimmin were liberated from our prudish backgrounds, we would appreciate explicit sexual material and would be bedded by an "appropriate" male. We distinguished between feminism and the male sexual revolution with the latter's elemental premise of access to wimmin on demand and its consequent absolution of male responsibility and commitment. As we clarified the basic hatred and fear of wimmin which pornography and rape express, we accepted the traditional liberal male distinction between erotica and porn, explaining that material displaying wimmin sexually to arouse men was OK so long as it contained no hint of physical abuse and violence. Violence is the key, we said. And we determined to take back the night. Finally, in an effort to reach out to less aware, less honest, less afraid, less safe and/or less committed wimmin, many have simplified the issues and simply focused on violence.

I think the simplification as well as the focus erroneous. We must ask why violence against wimmin is such an integral part of society; why it is expected that men will maim, rape, batter, mutilate, torture and murder wimmin; why rape, wife-beating and "incest" are ignored while wimmin who fight back face the full brutality of the system. Pornography is violent; but its violence stems from male objectification and victimization of wimmin. We are displayed legs apart, cunts open, arms out of the way, breasts posed, ears accessible, and mouths ready for male "pleasure." Objectified, we are objects whose function is to be acted upon by men — objects of male pleasure, pain, anger, joy, titillation, aggression, love, and hatred ... targets of male "attention." Straight porn exists to portray the objectification of wimmin, and it is

^{*} This material has been included in Sarah Hoagland's book, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value*, published by the Institute of Lesbian Studies, P.O. Box 60242, Palo Alto, CA 94306.

even more blatant in so-called lesbian porn.³ We are the targets at which they aim to get in some mood or other and then relieve themselves. Thus men do things to us and for us and at us and against us but never with us. As a result of objectification, female autonomy, integrity, independence, are invisible, conceptually non-existent. In their place men assert our victim status, and violence against wimmin follows *ipso facto*.

Objectification is violence, a violation of integrity, wholeness, and it leads to more violence; but it is important to acknowledge that objectification is not always *obviously* violent; it is not limited to physical assault, dismemberment, maiming and death. When we focus on explicitly and overtly violent material and on the physical violence of rape, we fail to acknowledge the full extent of the control men claim over us; we fail to admit that institutionalized heterosexuality is key in the maintenance of male supremacy. Over the centuries men have clothed male domination and authority in the rhetoric of romance and protection. We see only the most blatant of their violations as violence against us.⁴

Protection objectifies just as does predation, and violates our space.⁵ Paternalism operates to legitimize domination and establish control "for our own good." To protect us men do things to us and at us, and if they act "for" us, it is to create the ideology of special protection for wimmin and affirm our victim status: To be protected we must first be in danger. Thus it is in the interest of protectors that there be predators;6 for men to maintain the conceptual framework in which they can see themselves as protectors, they must establish and maintain an atmosphere in which wimmin are in danger; they must create our victim status. To maintain the ideology of special protection of wimmin, men have portrayed wimmin as helpless, defenseless, innocent - victims, targets. And when we step out of the feminine role, becoming active and guilty, it is a mere matter of logic that men step up overt physical violence against us to reaffirm our victim status. When they cannot control us through protection, the safety valve they have to fall back on is overt violence, predation. 7 But protection violates wimmin just as much as predation. Through institutional heterosexuality, men cast themselves as protectors.

If we focus on obvious violence against wimmin in pornography and rape rather than the fundamental objectification of wimmin essential to predation and protection, we will be increasingly tempted to turn to male protection, institutional and random: police protec-

tion, the use of men who see themselves as protectors, the fairytale father protector, increased laws on rape, violence and censorship for men to (selectively) enforce, neighborhood male vigilantes, the use of men in anti-porn and take-back-the-night campaigns. We will be more likely to use Playboy money to fund battered wimmin's shelters, child advocates and rape crisis lines. And we will be tempted to believe men are essential to our well-being. If we focus on obvious violence against wimmin, it will become increasingly difficult to fight institutional cooptation of feminism and maintain conceptual autonomy from conservatives who are concerned with pornography and rape in their efforts to return to "sexual purity." If we focus on violence against wimmin, we will forget that our victimization forces us to turn to men, and then asking for protection becomes an acceptable alternative. The essential function of the propaganda of pornography is objectification. The essential function of the propaganda of protection is also objectification. They both are tools which render wimmin victims, violate our integrity, fix us in male vision. Porn/ rape (predation) and protection emerge from the same ideology, and it is a matter of indifference to the successful maintenance of male supremacy which of the two we fall for.

If feminists focus on obvious violence against wimmin, rape and porn appear simply to be the results of some mens' actions who have been "conditioned" by a sexist society to vent "abnormal" but tolerated male aggression against wimmin. If, on the other hand, we focus on the objectification and victimization of wimmin, it becomes clear that rape and porn (predation) together with protection are tools men use to enforce female heterosexuality. Taking back the night only from predators reinforces our victimization. Taking back the night from predators as well as protectors challenges the rule of the fathers and the forced alliance of wimmin with men.

Notes:

1. My thanks and love to Julia Penelope for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this piece.

^{2.} The violence and death worship of Eros and of male erotic love is epitomized by Cupid's arrow. In Greek literature and in the Bible, Eros is a total taking and subsequent loss of identity in contract with Agape, a total giving (allegedly motherly love). Neither include Philia, companionship and "brotherly" love. The complete removal of giving and of companionship from erotic love in male thought betrays the poverty of the male concept of sexuality as well as of the concept of erotic "love" altogether.

3. There is now a slick, glossy monthly porn magazine coming out of England

concerned exclusively with so-called lesbians, Lesgirls.

4. To violate is to rape; *violate* and *violence* share the Indo-European root, *wei-, which means "vital force." *Wei- is possibly related to wiros which means "man" according to the editor of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, and appeared in Old English and Frankish as werewolfe while appearing Latin (vir) as virile. Also the editor thinks the latter relates to curia or court if it is regarded as deriving from co-vir which means "men together." Apparently, the vital force of men together, particularly virility in their courts, is violence and violation (rape) following the practice of werewolves.

5. While children are often protected, the protection is allegedly provided so they can have space to grow up and learn to take care of themselves. No such

expectations surround the conceptual basis of protected wimmin.

6. În fact most often protectors are themselves predators: Husbands more often beat their wives than strange wimmin, and fathers are more likely to rape their

daughters than strange girls.

7. For example, prior to the Shah's overthrow, Iranian men attacked feminist wimmin broadcasting a wimmin's program in order to "defend femininity" — punishing feminists and driving other Iranian wimmin to men for protection. The Ayotollah's men continue the same policy, attacking wimmin who refuse the veil.



Jerusha (#13, 1980)

Backroom with the Feminist Heroes

Conference for Women Against Pornography — New York City, 1979

I went to this conference on Women Against Pornography. I was into it. There we were at Martin Luther King High School in New York City. I was ready. Ripe for revolution.

All the hot-shot bigwig feminists were there. Susan Brownmiller. Lois Gould. Barbara Seaman. E.M. Broner. Phyllis Chesler. Shere Hite. Bella Abzug spoke with such fire and power that I wondered if I was at the Democratic National Convention, Gloria Steinem recited the story of her humiliation at the hands of Al Goldstein, who published a centerfold in Screw with Gloria's face on the body of a nude woman. Along the side were penises of assorted sizes, and the page was captioned, "Pin the Cock on the Feminist." When Gloria wrote a protest letter, she received a small box of candy and a message which read, "Dear Gloria, Eat it! Regards, Al Goldstein." But Bella told Gloria not to worry; Goldstein had published Gloria's face, but he had published Bella's labia on that centerfold; they were all in this together. Then Gloria said she felt better. Robin Morgan said she had to read a dirty story and strip for her parents and their friends in the theatre when she was six. She explained that her occasional brutal sexual fantasies were the result of "scartissue," and I thought that was very moving. She said that her idea of erotica was Anne Bradstreet's poetry, and I thought she was skirting (as it were) the issue.

A lot of other brave women got up and said they had been raped by their fathers and brothers and that they were shown pornography to justify the rapist's act. Another woman said that she was confused about the suppression of pornography and its relation to censorship, but that when *Playboy* said it was a magazine publishing serious authors and interviewing important people, and she read the *Playboy* interview with President Carter and turned the page to find a photograph of a nude woman, shot labia first, lickety-split down her middle, she lost her confusion.

I watched a slide show with some pretty disgusting slides — from peep shows, from record jackets, from advertisements. It became obvious that women are the victims of pernicious propaganda. It was equally apparent that not only are women themselves injured by

pornography, but pornography cripples male perception of women as well. The media seems to bombard the country with images of violence against women, and we all know what violence breeds.

A march on Times Square was announced for October 20th. That was pretty much that. Spirits were high. It had been years since all those feminists gathered together in one place to work on one important issue. But with all the pretty women, something was not quite right.

The next day, I attended the Lesbian Workshop, but they weren't discussing pornography. They were discussing the dilemma of trying to locate lesbians. They were deploring the sad implications of lesbians dressing like straight women and straight women dressing like lesbians. But a rather serious, vocal lesbian said that you could still tell the straight women from the dykes because straight women wore their ties loose like Diane Keaton, but dykes wore theirs tight around the neck like she did. Then she pulled her wide yellow-and-blue striped tie even tighter around her neck. We were all very relieved to hear *that!*

The discussion then turned to the fact that the conference organizers had not done an adequate job of recognizing lesbian issues in its exploration of the effects of pornography or even of recognizing the lesbian contingency at the conference. We got all riled about this.

Then we went back to the auditorium for the final round. A panel discussion with feminist organizers from around the country was scheduled. The only "famous" feminist on stage was Susan Brownmiller — all the other "stars" had headed home. The panel members gave their speeches and a small discussion was held about whether to invite the morally indignant churchgoing Catholic mother of seven to join us, or to give her the feminist position on ERA and abortion and all the other scandalous matters (no one mentioned lesbianism, oh no, not yet) instead.

Then a woman got up and asked where the third-world women were. Everyone looked around but no one stood up. Another woman got up and commented that maybe the third-world women couldn't afford this gathering, because God knows everyone wasn't as rich as some people present who made their capitalist-pig money off their successful mass-market books!

Susan Brownmiller knew who they were talking about. Now Susan had a long, hard month, and here she was, all tired and drained and (worst of all) *unappreciated!* at the end of her conference. She got

up and slapped her fist on the table and said, "This *always* happens at the end of feminist conferences!!!!" She was disgusted. So she apologized (yes, apologized!) to the rest of the audience for the unfortunate presence of these impolite, ungrateful women who had dared to mention that she and her friends might not have planned an absolutely perfect conference.

Now the lesbian in the tie was beside herself. She climbed to the podium with an aggressive stride and yelled that she is "sick and tired of this movement being run by cocksucking straight women. After all, how could anything be accomplished to fucking abolish violence against women since the cock was fucking ultimately responsible for all violence against women, and here were all these fucking straight women right before her very eyes and they were all going to go home to their men and suck cock!!!" And the lesbian made a few more remarks in that genre.

Brownmiller was furious. She started toward the dyke in the tie, shouting that by God, she was straight and she wasn't going to *take* this kind of abuse. The lesbian with the tie started to laugh and then bent down and called *Brownmiller* a cocksucker. Susan had to be restrained.

Then some lesbians said that they felt that the lesbian at the podium was not adequately conveying their position. Some straight women said that obviously, we all needed some consciousness-raising. A lesbian agreed — "Yes, that's the spirit. Let's talk about women rather than men and cocks." I almost thought it was about time to get peaceful. But Susan Brownmiller rose a final time, pointed at the woman in the tie, and said triumphantly, "See, she even *dresses* like a man."

Which remark set off another trauma in the audience. *All* the lesbians, myself included, started hissing and hollering, "*Apologize!* Apologize!" Susan Brownmiller did, but you could tell she wasn't a bit sorry. The woman in the tie wasn't sorry for her behavior either, although during the rest of the shouting, she remained uncertainly on stage, like leftover mashed potatoes on a plate. And we might be still all shouting if we hadn't had to vacate the building.

Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement*

A strong woman is a woman in whose head a voice is repeating, I told you so, ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch, ballbuster, nobody will ever love you back, why aren't you feminine, why aren't you soft, why aren't you quiet, why aren't you dead?

- Marge Piercy, "For Strong Women," from The Moon Is Always Female**

Really good women, really "nice" women, really sisterly women, are dead women.

Well, no. Nobody literally expects millions of us to drop down *kerflop* clutching flowers to our bosoms like Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat, and yet I wonder. Women are supposed to make other people feel good, to fill others' needs without having any of our own — this is the great Feminine Imperative. Such self-suppression amounts to

the death of the self. Why demand such an impossibility?

All oppressed people must be controlled. Since open force and economic coercion are practical only part of the time, ideology — that is, internalized oppression, the voice in the head — is brought in to fill the gap. When people discover their own power, governments tremble. Therefore, in addition to all the other things that are done to control people, their own strength must be made taboo to them. Vast numbers of men can be allowed to experience some power as long as they expend their power against other men and against women — a desirable state of affairs since it keeps men (and men and women) from cooperating, which would be a grave menace to the powers that be. Therefore the Masculine Imperative is less severe than the Feminine one.

The Masculine Imperative means that men avoid the threat of failure, inadequacy, and powerlessness — omnipresent in a society built on

competition and private property - by existing against others.

But the Feminine Imperative allows of no self-help at all. We exist for others.

^{*} Republished in Joanna Russ' Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts — Feminist Essays, The Crossing Press, Freedom, CA, 1985.

^{**}Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Copyright © 1980 by Marge Piercy.

But women are also terrified by female strength, women judge success in women to be the worst sin, women force women to be "unselfish," women would rather be dead than strong, rather helpless than happy.

Feminist women, too.

If you've been forbidden the use of your own power for your own self, you can give up your power or you can give up your self. If you're effective, you must be so for others but never for yourself (that would be "selfish"). If you're allowed to feel and express needs, you must be powerless to do anything about them and can only wait for someone else — a man, an institution, a strong woman — to do it for you.

That is, you can be either a Magic Momma or a Trembling Sister. Magic Mommas are rare and Trembling Sisters are common; the taboo is so strong that it's safer to be totally ineffective, or as near to it as is humanly possible. Moreover, election to the status of Magic Momma requires some real, visible achievement, which, in a maledominated society, is rare. Nonetheless, every feminist group contains at least one Magic Momma; success being entirely relative, somebody can always be elevated to MM status. (If canny group members, aware of this possibility, refuse to do, say, or achieve anything, they can be chosen for past achievement, or smaller and smaller differences in behavior can be seized on as evidence of Magic Momma-hood.) Since we are all struggling with the Feminine Imperative, one of the ways achieving women combat the guilt of success is by agreeing to be Magic Mommas.

MMs give to others — eternally.

MMs are totally unselfish.

MMs have infinite time and energy.

MMs love all other women, always.

MMs never get angry at other women.

MMs don't sleep.

MMs never get sick.

If MMs don't fulfill the above conditions, they feel horribly, horribly guilty.

MMs know that they can never do enough.

Like the Victorian mother, the Magic Momma pays for her effectiveness by renouncing her own needs. But these don't go away. The MM feels guilt over her achievements, guilt over not doing more (in fact, this is the common female guilt over not doing everything for everyone), and the steadily mounting rage of deprivation, as well as the added rage caused by having to feel guilty all the time.

Meanwhile the Trembling Sister has plenty to be enraged about too. Having avoided the guilt of being effective, she's allowed to feel

and express her own needs, but she pays for these "advantages" by an enforced helplessness which requires that somebody fill her needs for her, since she's not allowed to do so herself.

The trouble is that nobody can.

No matter how much being taken care of the TS manages to wangle out of others, it is never enough. For being taken care of is exactly what she does not need. It reinforces her helplessness, while what she really needs is access to her own effectiveness — and that is something no

one can give to another person.

The Trembling Sister, insisting on being given what she doesn't need and can't use, becomes more and more deprived, and more and more enraged. The Magic Momma, enraged at her enforced guilt and similar enforced deprivation, sooner or later fails to meet the Trembling Sister's needs. She may become ill or reveal some human flaw. She may withdraw or criticize, or get angry. If MM-hood has been bestowed on her without her knowledge and consent, she may not

know what's expected of her and may "sin" in ignorance.

The Trembling Sister can tolerate achievement in women only when such achievement is "unselfish" — i.e., accompanied by visible giving to everyone else and divested of visible satisfaction — and remember, it's precisely her own effectiveness that she's suppressing. She now has the unbearably enraging experience of being (apparently) abandoned by someone who is (apparently) enjoying the very sort of effectiveness she has made inaccessible to herself. The Magic Momma, already angry from years of self-deprivation which have turned out to be useless (since nothing she does ever satisfies either the TS or her own conscience) has the unbearably enraging experience of ingratitude and complaint from someone for whom she has worked hard and "sacrificed everything."

Worse, neither can justify her rage, since our (usually false) social assumption that people cause their own failures happens, in both their cases, to be perfectly true. At the same time both feel their rage to be justified, since — according to the Feminine Imperative — the MM is right to deprive herself and the TS right to be helpless.

Put the MM and the TS together and you get the conventional

female role.

You also get trashing.

Trashing in the feminist movement has always proceeded from "below" "upwards," directed by the Trembling Sister (that is, those who've adopted the TS position) at the self-elected (or merely supposed) MM. The hidden agenda of trashing is to remain helpless and to fail, whatever the ostensible motivation. The payoff is to Be Good

(though miserable). The TS/MM scenario is predicated on the unrealistic ascription of enormous amounts of power to one side and the even more unrealistic ascription of none at all to the other. It assumes that hurting another woman's feelings is the worst thing — the very worst thing—the most unutterably awful thing—that a woman can do. In a world where women and men are starved, shot, beaten, bombed, and raped, the above assumption takes some doing, but since the MM/TS script requires it, it gets made. (The script also assumes that the MM has no feelings, or if she does, hurting them is a meritorious act.)

MMs do less harm; they can work themselves to death or paralyzed with guilt — do nothing. Or they can encourage other MM's guilt or fail to discourage TS's expectations of MMs. But discouraging a TS's expectations of an MM is an enterprise fraught

with risk, as many feminists know to their cost.

What to do?

Both parties need the confidence that self-love and self-assertiveness are not evil. The MM needs to learn that feelings of guilt are not objective political obligations; the TS needs to learn that feeling intensely conflicted about power has nothing to do with objective helplessness.

The MM needs to be helped. The TS needs not to be helped.

No one originally takes either position of her own free will. The Feminine Imperative is forced on all of us. But in adulthood, and certainly within a feminist community, a woman who remains in either position is her own prisoner. The women's community as a mystically loving band of emotional weaklings who make up to each other by our kindness and sweetness for the harshness we have to endure in the outside world is a description that exactly characterizes the female middle-class sub-culture as it's existed in patriarchy for centuries — without changing a thing. This is not a revolutionary movement but a ghetto in which anyone seen as having achievement, money, or power is cast as a Magic Momma, whose function is to make up to everyone else for the world's deprivation and their terror of effectiveness. This is impossible. So the requirement becomes to make others feel good all the time, an especially seductive goal in times of political reaction when activity directed outward at the (seemingly) monolithic social structure is not only frustrating but frighteningly dangerous. So honesty goes by the board, hurt feelings are put at a premium, general fear and paralysis set in, and one by one any women who oversteps the increasingly circumscribed area of what's permissible is trashed. Eventually, after the demons of success and effectiveness have been banished, and all the female villains who made everyone else feel miserable have left or been silenced, what happens?

The group disintegrates.

The Feminine Imperative has been faithfully served. The enemy has been driven from the ranks. Feminism has been destroyed.

Some revolutionary proposals:

Self-sacrifice is vile.

Martyrdom cults (like that surrounding Sylvia Plath), which link failure, death, and female approval, are abominable.

Anyone who ascribes enormous success, money, or power to any

woman — certainly any feminist — is daydreaming.

"Uncritical support" is a contradiction in terms.

There is a crucial distinction between the personal and the political. The former leads to the latter but not automatically or without hard work.

Women are not beginners at art or politics; we need to recover our forerunners, not remain in a socially and self-imposed infancy.

Public, political activity is crucial for a political movement.

Demands for the right "tone" in women's interactions are like those statements made to us by men about *our* tone, i.e., "I would've listened to you women if only you'd been ladylike."

Political theory is crucial for a political movement. I favor the incorporation of class analysis into feminism (*not* vice-versa) but any way of dealing with political relations between male groups will do. Unless (like J. Edgar Hoover about Communism) you think all we need to know about contemporary patriarchy is that we're agin it.

What makes the MM/TS scenario so stubborn is the hidden insistence that a woman cannot, must not, be allowed to use her power on her own behalf. Our society runs on self-aggrandizement for men and self-abasement for women; talk of self-love terrifies men (for whom it means admitting interdependence and emotionality) while women can only expect that I'm recommending brutality and callousness.

One remedy would be to remember Cicely Tyson's TV portrayal of Harriet Tubman (in *A Woman Called Moses*). Biographers are always surprised when women like Tubman "sacrifice" their personal lives (or so the biographers assume) for a "cause." That is, they interpret such women's actions in terms of the Feminine Imperative. But to be General Moses was no Victorian self-sacrifice, any more than Cicely Tyson (in my opinion, the best living performer in the theatre, uncontainable in a conventionally superficial role) sacrificed something she really wanted to do in order to do her duty by playing Harriet Tubman. When Harriet Tubman said that God wanted her to lead her people to freedom, she was not submitting her will to another's but arrogating to herself the authenticity and truth of her God, not losing

herself but uniting herself with her own transpersonal dimension. Viewers who saw Tyson tuck her chin down in maidenly shyness and whisper, "Momma and Daddy, the last thing I want to do is cause you to worry," — and then burst forth in fire, "But GOD — " know that they have not seen anything remotely like self-sacrifice, either on the character's part or the actress's. An action may be hard, unpleasant, dangerous, the salvation of others — and heroically self-creating.

Nor is there anything wrong with that unless you believe that human selves — especially female selves — are intrinsically bad, or

that we are a lousy species.

To insist that women challenge their own fear of effectiveness and their own guilt for behaving effectively, to insist that we both behave honestly and responsibly *and* risk hurting others' feelings (which is hardly the worst thing in the world) is emphatically to disobey the Feminine Imperative. It's selfish. It isn't sisterly. It isn't "nice."

But it is, I'm beginning to suspect, the feminist act.

I haven't, needless to say, written the above out of pure, altruistic concern for the women's community. And I can't envision any of it affecting those women so alienated from their own power that they feel desperately that they must have a Magic Momma (somewhere, somehow) at all costs, even the cost of being miserably helpless. But there are many women who don't feel helpless themselves, yet feel guiltily (a) that everyone else must be, and (b) they don't want to risk the possibility that these totally helpless and vulnerable people may create a very nasty scene. (Quite a contradiction, that!) I also violently resent being first elevated to mythological status and then slammed for it. And the insistence on this person's hurt feelings and that one's tremendous vulnerability and the exquisite fragility of everyone (which doesn't prevent some of them kicking up a very nasty fuss when they don't get what they want). People dealing with external oppression don't act this way. (For one thing, they don't have time.) The MM/TS syndrome is a sign of internalized oppression and a form of addiction; that is, since it reinforces the Feminine Imperative, the more you get, the less you have and the more you need. The scenario strikes me as class-linked; I suspect that those oppressed in a directly economic way or by open force don't do this nearly as much — or at least that it doesn't reach the same pitch of feverishness. However, it may be that the kind of services women qua women provide (affection, admiration, R&R, personal service) require that women be controlled by ideology, since these services must be provided voluntarily at least to some degree.

I think that the unexpressed, unformulated, and very bitter belief that sexism is true is also at work here, that is, the idea that women can't

do this or that. It's this belief that causes the MM's passionately angry disappointment when Unknown Woman A's work proves to be terrible, and the TS's conviction that the only way most women can ever have the pleasures of public success is if the few of us who have (in some magically mysterious way) gained access to the public world of culture and action will tell lies about the achievements of the others. Such a conviction adds to the pain of dispraise (which everybody of course feels) and rage at its seeming arbitrariness. Why is Famous Woman B saying such things about Unknown Woman A's work when A's only hope is for B to be nice to her? Explanations like "elitism," "male identification," selling out, or intoxication with fame, explain nothing; you might as well say Original Sin and be done with it. B is simply being mean, a dreadful act when all access to success is (supposedly) in her all-powerful hands.

There is also the problem of ignorance. Those without much access to the public world are unlikely to have had contact with the real hatchet-women of the patriarchy, or real Queen Bees, or know the conditions under which Famous Woman B actually has to work.

For example, in SW 15 Pamela Johnston asks if feminists really have no control over the covers trade publishers put on their books. The answer is no, none whatever. Sometimes even the editors don't. Authorial control over the very text of a science fiction novel is not standard in the trade and must be negotiated. It is often resented; I once lost a magazine sale by insisting that a story of mine stay as written. (How many book sales I or others may have lost by getting a reputation for being "difficult" I don't know.) Even when negotiated, an author's control over the text amounts only to veto power over the editor's or publisher's changes, "not to be unreasonably refused" (you figure that one out). Good editors don't change good authors' mss. — but "good editors" means a minority of those in the field. If I called the cover of Motherlines "dull," that's because the situation is so much worse than Pamela Johnston knows. I truly remembered the cover as fairly harmless (I didn't have it in front of me and edited out the rope - partly to keep my sanity and partly by confusing the paperback cover with the hardback one, which is different). But even with the rope, it was a real relief that none of the women thereupon was (a) lolling naked on the sand, fondling a giant python with her mouth open to receive same, or (b) naked save for a pointed helmet, rhinestone pasties, G-string, and claws. These are the Dutch cover for Vonda McIntyre's Dreamsnake and the British cover for my The Female Man. In 1971 a feminist memoir appeared in print under the title I, Bitch with a cover of a woman in leather, stiletto-heeled boots, and a whip;

the covers for Francine Mezo's adventure series, published by Avon, are just as vividly unbearable. In such company Motherlines' cover is not an outrage; it's only dully, expectably, routinely repellent.

Did you know that the hardcover publisher of a book gets half of

all the author's paperback income for ever and ever?

That one of the most famous American feminists has been on welfare and had to have money raised by others to pay her hospital bill when she fell ill?

That another, internationally known, lives on less than \$9,000 a

year, out of necessity? By farming?

That you can publish six books in twelve years, sell 100,000 of some of them, and make less than \$2,500 a year, including money from book reviews, other non-fiction, short-story sales, and foreign sales?

I'm not complaining, but trying to demolish the illusion of the

MM's enormous power and success.

There is simply no such thing. What does exist is the American or simply modern — illusion that "celebrities" (in however tiny a community) have real, pleasure-filled lives, and the rest of us have what, unreal ones? — and the insistence on failure and dependency

that underlies such attributions of power.

To understand that no one has or can have your power, that it remains in you no matter how forbidden you feel it to be, means defying the patriarchal taboo and that's very hard. It means claiming one's own limited but real power and abandoning one's inflated notion of other women's power. It means engaging in a direct public confrontation with the patriarchy as embodied in men and men's institutions, not concentrating on its symbolic presence in other members of the women's community.

To risk failure is bad enough. To risk success is even worse. After all, women have been burnt alive for claiming a power which was, paradoxically, not enough to save them. It's safer to be weak, safer to have someone else be strong for you and be punished for it in your place.

I believe that trashing, far from being the result of simple envy, arises from a profound ambivalence towards power. The intensity of feeling, the violent inculcation of guilt, the extreme contrast of omnipotence and powerlessness, the lack of substantive complaint,* the

^{*&}quot;Cruel," "unfair," "unkind," "After I worked so hard," not "gentle" or "positive," are typical phrases (I'm skimming back issues of feminist periodicals). The claim that someone has stopped writing or publishing as a catastrophic result also crops up. Years ago a very young (junior-high-school age) woman asked me to send her copies of all my work and the answers to three pages of questions about

anger, the absolute lack of impersonality or a sense of public activity, the utter demandingness — all these echo a mother-daughter relationship in which the terrible, hidden truth is not that our mothers are strong, but that they are very weak. The complaint, "You are so strong and I am so helpless" hides the far worse one, "I am strong enough that my strength will get me into terrible trouble, and you are too weak to protect me if that happens."

For all oppressed people strength and success are double-edged: heartbreakingly desirable and very dangerous. But to "risk winning" (Phyllis Chesler's phrase from *Women and Madness*, a book to which I owe many of the ideas in this piece) is the only way out of oppression.

"Successful" feminists aren't immune to this terror of power; all the women I know feel it. We take the risk anyway. That's the only secret, not some fantastic, illusory power-fame-and-glory that some women have and others don't. I recently heard a conversation between two Lesbians, one of whom was living openly as such and one of whom was afraid to leave her marriage. The married one said, "I can't leave my husband because I'm not brave, like you." To which the other (who had left her husband only two years before) said "Don't give me that. I was just as scared as you when I left my marriage, but I did it anyway. That's what made me brave."

The MM/TS polarity is illusory. Both are positions in the same belief system. Both are engaged in ritually sacrificing the possibility of a woman's being effective on her own behalf, not needy and ineffective, not effective and altruistic, but effective for herself.

It's selfish, vicious, and nasty and will cause everyone within a thousand miles to faint flat.

But it beats being dead.

it for a paper her teacher had suggested; I wrote her, explaining that writers hadn't the time to fulfill such requests and referred her to her teacher, who ought to be teaching her how to do research. Her older sister then wrote me, stating that she was going to expose me in MS., that because of my bad behavior her sister, who had hoped to be a writer, had given up all such ambitions.

from Vulnerability and Power

There is a belief among lesbians that the way to establish trust among ourselves is to make ourselves vulnerable to each other. Most Lesbian feminists I know plan for a world in which we can be safely vulnerable to each other. I myself once had this vision and argued that so long as a society exercises power as control, vulnerability will be confused with impotency. Thus one who is vulnerable is a target of attack, a victim.... I [still] envision a time when we can be open to each other with less caution and greater flexibility because we allow greater honesty to inform our exchanges. But I no longer believe this vision connects in any way with the concept of vulnerability....

So it is important that we examine the belief among Lesbian feminists that the way to establish trust among ourselves is to make ourselves vulnerable to each other, that this is a Lesbian–feminist ideal. We should also examine the converse belief that in order to retain power we can never really open to another womon, never share our full selves. These two beliefs combine to yield the prevalent idea that we cannot have a living—in relationship with another womon and still maintain autonomy because sharing in a relationship is seen as putting another womon's needs over our own. More importantly, I have heard it argued that autonomy and intimacy are incompatible. My suggestion is that using vulnerability as a tool leads not to intimacy but rather to a false closeness, a dependency, and that while the use of vulnerability is incompatible with autonomy, development of intimacy is not.

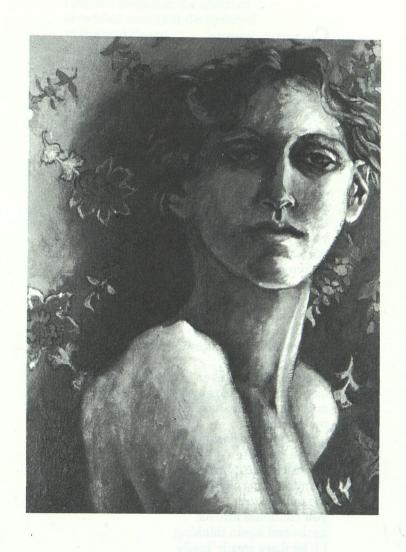
Among Lesbians, if I make myself vulnerable in order to establish trust, if I open to a womon in ways that invite her to wound me, if I open up before we have found a common ground of trust, my opening is most likely an attempt to gain control in the relationship without accepting responsibility either for the attempt or for any control I might succeed in gaining. For example, if I share doubts about myself with a womon before we have grounds for trust, I am revealing to her what I am defensive about. If she then criticizes me for the very thing I am defensive about, she has declared open war because I "trusted" her with this information; she has betrayed my trust. This then acts as

a constraint on her: So long as we remain "friends" she cannot criticize me in these areas; she must "support" me, i.e., give the appearance of agreeing with everything I do. Our bonding has become a binding, and our "friendship," then, has become not an open, honest exchange of ideas, critiques, and support but rather a means whereby I have enlisted someone to insulate me from my fears and pain (as opposed to someone who may hold me through them.)...

For there to be the risk of bonding, instead, I must be prepared for all responses, not only the ones I want....The real risk of bonding lies in a willingness to take the next step, to change the relationship, to lose the security of predictableness. The risk lies in embracing the unknown.

I also do not mean to suggest we should forever guard against being vulnerable to each other....Vulnerability is an *effect* of bonding, but it is not a *tool* for bonding (or for anything else but control). Used as a tool, vulnerability establishes the "trust" of dependency but not the trust of intimacy.

At the time I wrote this, I was focusing on unravelling ways stereotypical femininity both was created (by men) out of male dominance and was developed (by women) as a means of resistance and control. I had not yet begun to focus on how masculine concepts such as "autonomy" affect us. Subsequently in my book, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Institute of Lesbian Studies, P.O. Box 60242, Palo Alto, CA 94306), in which the full vulnerability argument from *SW* appears, I challenge the concept of "autonomy," among other reasons because it encourages us to believe that engaging with others limits us. Instead I created a concept, autokoenony (ô to kēn ó nē) meaning the self in community; an autokeononous being is one who develops her self through interacting as one among many, she is both elemental and related. This concept, or something like it, is crucial for the development of plurality and the understanding that difference is not a threat (as an anglo-european heritage teaches) but a gift.



All Lesbian Mime Troupe on Tour: Samantha 1977, 18" x 12", oil Sudie Rakusin (#20, 1982)

Llorona

Cry sorrow sorrow coming with your dried snakes charm charming the crazed and the innocent with your lyrical lunacy mystical tales of the moon you claim immortality you you think you'll find me there docile bewildered the lost child torn from you by demons that swirl and burn amidst the golden brown hair of your devil devil child oh cry sorrow with your spells and the magic no one doubts you own the power that swallows everyone's fantasies vou claim life forever using scars for tears and a noise noise that shakes reverberates beating all the passion with a passion the black sweet bruises and dark systems wanting to wring them out of me out of you you claim life forever again and again thinking I'll be there steady ready to take up the fight of mother and daughter divided unsatisfied forever

antagonistic cry sorrow let your ovary throb from the pain of my absence I am the daughter the children shredded castrated decapitated in the arid desert the blood red flames in your eyes which serve as blinders to keep you from seeing what you wish not to see take a white womon to lie with you clean smooth as enamel the veins plainly visible through vinyl skin rest your head on what you claim so close to perfection and take repose rest rest but then when all seems finally quiet . there's a beat beat a beat in your head a pain in your abdomen

y siempre siempre por las noches there's that fearful wailing

Sex is Always the Headliner

Introduction by Robin Ruth Linden

Karlene Faith's Journal: Summer 1972

uanita has been morose all week since getting her write-up. It happened Tuesday night after our talk about race and sex and where it all connects. "I was really caught up in what we were talkin' about, and when I got to the cottage, I was following my girlfriend around, telling her about it. She's like family to me. When she went in to take a bath, I went in and sat on the side of the tub just talkin' to her and washin' her back, like I do with my husband and kids at home. No big thing. The police came along and gave us a write-up for homosexuality — can you believe that? Most of these staff are really sick. Giving me a felony write-up just for talkin' to my friend and washin' her back."

I first met Lorene months ago in the staff snack bar, where she was a waitress. She's a beauty. Tall, strong body, big bright black eyes, delicate braids circling her head, a smile to melt the heart. She wanted to know about the book I was reading, Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, so I left it for her. She read it, loved it, we talked about it, and I started bringing her other things she wanted to read. After we'd talked only about books for a month, she started talking about her life — her addiction and arrests, her misery as a prostitute. And she talked about her dreams getting out, finding work as a model, buying some decent furniture and a car, making a home with her girlfriend.

Lorene's leaving tomorrow, and today she got a message to me asking me to meet her. She told me she had something important to say, and after a lot of hesitation she blurted out, "I've told you the truth about everything else, but you know my friend I talk about? How would you fell if you knew that we were ... you

know ... I don't know how to tell you ... I really love her. You know?"

I started to say that I'd assumed all along that she and her girlfriend were lovers, that she was a lesbian ... But she protested, "No! I'm not a lesbian. I'm not homosexual. I'm just in love with this woman, don't you see?" It was the stigma, yet one more label, that she recoiled from. We talked for a long time about how to deal with fear and guilt in a world where other people make up the rules, even in matters of the heart. She said it was the first time she'd admitted that she loves a woman. I hope it isn't the last.

My special thanks to Robin Linden for the incredible patience and inspiring and skilled editorial assistance which I received from her in preparing this piece for Sinister Wisdom.

Introduction

In the late 1960's, when "women's liberation" was nascent and the anti-war movement was the focal point of American radical politics, a strong, anti-racist prison resistance movement had begun to take root. Although "free" women were active in the movement's leadership, before the early 1970's there was little support or opportunity for women who had been incarcerated to speak publicly about their prison experience.

The stereotypes of women prisoners are forbidding. Social scientists have colluded with the media to create images of sadistic bull dykes who terrorize the entire prison community. Rarely have these stereotypes been recognized for the homophobia they embody and encourage.

The actual daily lives of people who are warehoused in "total institutions" like prisons and mental hospitals have traditionally been hidden from outsiders. During the 1970's, women in California made tremendous progress in gaining access to and accountability from the California Institution for Women (CIW), the state prison in Frontera, sixty miles east of Los Angeles. In 1980 access problems are no less serious. Nonetheless, over the past decade, we have succeeded in exposing the conditions of women's lives behind prison walls.

Karlene Faith is a lifetime community activist. In 1968 she began working with men and women caught up in the California criminal justice system. In 1972 Karlene broke new ground when she began to concentrate intensively on interviews and cultural support work with the women at CIW. Later that year she organized the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, which, until 1976, brought hundreds of outsiders into the prison as volunteer participants in educational, political and cultural programs. In the early days of "women's music," Karlene worked with the "Women on Wheels" production of a concert tour of California. This tour brought the issue of prison access to the awareness of nearly 10,000 people, primarily women.

Karlene and I spent an afternoon talking about her work inside CIW as an interviewer-advocate-teacher-friend...I told Karlene that when I first read her work on sexuality in prison I was amazed at the women's openness about their most intimate selves. Karlene explained that when she began interviewing at CIW, she hadn't expected that sexuality would be an ongoing matter of discussion:

Actually, I was reticent to bring up the subject of sexuality and relationships between women. For years male (and male- identified) social scientists have made a fetish out of homosexuality in prisons. The images they have produced, couched in academic

language, have been seriously offensive to prisoners and have reinforced the worst homophobic stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. I didn't want to feed into that American obsession with sex. And yet in every conversation and interview, matters of intimacy between women came up in one context or another.

So there it was. Like everyone else, women in prison were interested in talking about sexuality. What they wanted, simply, was for their own truths to be told. Prisoners are the only true experts about life in prison — what it means to live behind cell bars, coiled razor and barbed wire fences, laser beams, electronic doors and guarded walls. What the rest of us can do is document their reality insofar as they choose to share it with us.

The following article is adapted from a chapter by the same title in *Curtains Over the Bars*, Karlene's book [still] in progress.

Rules and Regulations of the Director of Corrections. Title 15 (Crime Prevention and Corrections), Article I, Section 3007 (Sexual Behavior).

"Inmates may not participate in illegal sexual acts. Inmates are specifically excluded in laws which remove legal restraints from acts between consenting adults. Inmates must avoid deliberately placing themselves in situations and behaving in a manner which is designed to encourage illegal sexual acts."

Norma: The institutional policy on homosexuality is "Don't Get Caught." Otherwise you get a write-up and disciplinary action. They can't officially condone it, even though it's no longer against the law on the outside. There's no such thing as rape in here, the way they play it up in books and movies. "Homosexuality in Prison!" They make it sound like prison invented it. If a woman cuts her hair, they figure she's turned gay. Sex is always the headliner.

Susan: I never felt threatened by it, nor did anyone ever express to me that they did. There were none of the horror stories your hear, or see in the movies. Stories of women being raped, having brooms stuck up them, held down, forced to do it. I never, never saw any intimidation to be involved sexually. I never saw or experienced it ever happening except between two consenting adult women who both wanted to become sexually close...

Juanita: Homosexuality in here isn't like the things you see on TV — S&M trips, shower stall rapes, the horrible things. My feelings about it have really changed since I've been locked up. We can talk about it with each other. We can respect each other. I have fears about

it for myself, but hey, if that's what you want to do, I'm not going to look down on it. I wish people wouldn't look at it as dirty or nasty. If society didn't look on things that way, it could be accepted and not be a big thing.

Prisons frustrate every natural human need. The need for good food must be suppressed. The need for restful sleep must be allayed. The need for joyous work must be buried. The need for uncensored time with friends must be ignored. And the need for sexual comfort must be denied. But it doesn't work. To be deprived of life's sensory experiences is not to lose interest in them. To the contrary.

Upon admission to the state prison, each woman who is a "known" or suspected "homosexual" is labeled. During the time she is locked up, she will carry an "H on her jacket," her official file where the label is recorded. It is commonly estimated by "corrections" officials that between 15 and 20 percent of women prisoners are "true homosexuals." This figure is probably irrelevant, since many women are falsely labeled "homosexual" and other women who are lesbians go undetected.

Often, a new prisoner is labeled "homosexual" if her clothing or mannerisms appear "masculine." A woman can be coerced into confessing to be a "homosexual" if she is sufficiently harassed by the suspecting staff and/or psychiatrist. Or rumors of a prisoner's "homosexuality," either verbal or written, may be passed along the chain of law enforcement agencies that process her before she reaches the dead end of prison. There is often no formal verification of such rumors, and a woman — lesbian or not — may even be unaware that she has an "H on her jacket." Nonetheless, while in prison, many women will learn to love other women.

Susan: Probably more than 90 percent of the women here get involved in homosexual relationships — actually making love with another woman — whether just to try it once or twice, or to be involved in an ongoing way. Some women never encountered homosexuality before they came to CIW. Others, whether or not they were involved before CIW, learned about it in juvenile hall or county jails. And some have been lesbians for lifetimes.

Joann: I understand homosexuality now. I even respect it. Women become much closer in here than they would on the streets. Women like me who have been involved with men their entire life are thrown off into this institution with all these beautiful women — well, of course, prison breeds homosexuality. If you need something, there's

no man to call, so you get closer to women than you would on the streets. In here a friendship can turn to love, even though outside it would just be a good, strong friendship. And after you get love, sex is just another step. You don't have to say, "C'mon, let's try it..." It just happens. I learned that I don't need men. A lot of women are with men because it's all they know. If I do find a man to be with when I get out, it will be strictly by my own choice.

One of the functions of prison is to cultivate submissiveness and dependency. Yet, for many women, being severed from any possibility of dependence on men is the first step toward independence of mind. Often, the emergence of self accompanies newly discovered intimacy with other women. As women learn to love other women, they may also learn to love themselves. And a woman's growing regard for her own body is often the key to this transition.

Sandra: My self-image was very low until four years ago when I came to prison. I've always felt self-conscious about my body, inadequate, and it distracted from my experience as a female. When I started menstruating, I though it was because I'd been masturbating, and that I'd done something wrong. And there was so much stress placed on having large breasts and tiny waist. I had neither and I felt flawed and guilty, somehow to blame. If my self-image had been better, I don't believe I would have kept on picking inferior men for partners. Since I've been here with women, I've been able to accept myself, and I've found freedom. I don't feel guilt anymore. I've been with the same woman all four years, and she has helped me overcome a lot of my guilt about myself.

Roberta: I never really liked women until I came here, I guess because I didn't like myself. We have so much time together, to really know each other. It's really something to have friends who know everything about you, and still like you. Until I came here, I was very ashamed of my body, but now I'm pretty damned proud of it. And I know now that there's nothing wrong with homosexuality. I'm a woman and now I'm proud of it. It's time we all started listening to our own souls, instead of to all the perverted rules other people make up for us.

For women like Sandra and Roberta, learning to accept and love themselves is the great paradox of prison confinement.

Susan: A lot of women in here grew up always in subservient relationships — in relationship to the families they were raised in, to their jobs, to the man in their life. Then all of a sudden they're ripped

from all their connections, ripped off from their husband, ripped off from their children, and placed in prison on their own. Alone. They don't have these people, these men, to lean on or hide behind anymore. They're in interactions with people who are strangers. They don't know these other women. And they're forced to find out who they are. There's a whole lot of women who come to incredible realizations about who they are as people, and where their strengths really are, untapped sources of strength within themselves...

Even if women go back to their men, the relationships will have to change in a good way. A lot of times you get married when you're really young, and you have a couple of kids, and pretty soon you're not sleeping together except maybe once a month, and the woman's not being satisfied. Well, here she is in this situation where she gets into a relationship with another woman, and she finds out about her own sexual needs, her likes, her dislikes, because she's experiencing it with another woman. Sure a lot of women go back to men when they get out, but they have a stronger basis to struggle with them.

Female prisoners are often stereotyped as "stud broads" — women who from physical appearance might be easily mistaken for men. Yet probably less than 3 percent of the women I observed in the prison fit the "stud broad" stereotype — never more than twenty women in a population exceeding six hundred. Contrary to the images in homophobic research and the media, "stud broads" are no more likely than other women to be aggressive or hostile, and in fact they are often unusually quiet and gentle. As a group, these women command respect from other prisoners, as though they were men, and they are often the target of both positive and negative attention. Some "stud broads" recoil from playing the "butch" in relationships, while others act out the role with confidence and flair, making the most of their desirability to "femmes."

Susan: When you go around here, you see maybe four, five women in the whole prison who are righteous stud broads. Not very many. But those women really use sex to control other women. They perpetuate a lot of things that I don't think are good, like "you do the laundry, you get me a cup of coffee." They get these services by satisfying a woman sexually, which really trips me out.

I struggle against that kind of role playing because I don't think it's positive. But it's not the dominant thing that's happening. You find the women who get involved with stud broads are usually ones that have a husband and think it's to their benefit to be dominated.

What's the role of women in society? The women who are vulnerable to these kinds of relationships are those whose whole life experience made them think they were inferior. They need somebody to give them guidance for what they do in their life, somebody to tell them what to do. They need to be emotionally and sexually dependent.

What's real interesting to me is the difference in the sexual relationship of a stud broad and a woman, and just two women. Two women satisfy each other sexually. There's equal sharing of whatever's going on, whatever it is. The stud broad sometimes won't allow hereself to be touched. She is then not vulnerable, the way men are not supposed to be ... But not a lot of women are into role playing.

"Jailhouse Turn-Out" (JTO) is prison vernacular for a woman who has her first sexual experience with another woman while she is incarcerated. Her unguarded enthusiasm and openness about her new sexual discoveries are often offensive and painful to older lesbians who must live with the "H" stigma.

Kathryn: If you're unfortunate enough to have homosexual on your record, your life is really miserable. I'm one of those with an "H on my jacket," so I'm really considered a detriment to the prison society, even though I live very quietly in here. And yet they'll let these jailhouse turn-outs come in here and move in with their latest trick and carry on, conducting themselves in a disgraceful manner all over the campus. Yet someone who has been homosexual for years comes in here, and they're immediately set upon to change to a "better way of life."

They told me if I was ever caught in my room with a woman, I'd go to rack (solitary deprivation). It would go with me to the board and hold up my (release) date. I'm not in here for being a lesbian, but you'd think I was because of the way they carried on about it when I went to the board for my time. They didn't talk to me at all about my crime, which involved a great deal of money. They talked to me about my homosexuality. I really don't think they understand about love. They don't understand two people just loving each other. It has to be something nasty, and it has to be physical. All love isn't physical.

Norma: Before coming here I had talked with myself and admitted the entire truth about being a woman who loves women, and in doing so I no longer felt guilty or wrong. But this place is full of phonies trying to imitate homosexuals. If I was younger, they would make me feel ashamed of being what I am. I've seen so many one-sided affairs, getting someone involved with them, really in love, then dropping that person to move on to another.

Just a small percentage of women enter this place as real sureenough lesbians. The rest are playing a game, and I can't prostitute myself or them. I don't need sex to the point where I just gotta have a woman. A relationship has to be on a high plane before I can enjoy the sex side of it. It's hard to find someone to hit it off with so you can have a happy relationship. It's like it is anywhere when you're new and alone. You don't just walk into a new situation and find someone you can love and live with. I've found out that there are lots of things to do with energy, and sex is just one of them.

Being "butch" in here requires that I think twice on every word and action that could possibly have any significance regarding another woman. Inmates and staff pick up real quick if I talk to the same woman too often. Lest it be overheard, I can't say out loud that I "love" someone. They try to make you feel base and degraded, and I know I'm neither.

These women who come in here and pretend to be butches are damned repulsive to me. If you know who and what you are, you don't need to signify. I know that as a woman I can offer a fuller life to another woman than a man can, for the simple reason I can understand her. If you really care for somebody, you might want to just touch them. And men don't seem to know how to do that. With a woman neither of us needs to pretend or hold back our desires. We can be exactly what we are—two women experiencing deep, heartfelt and soul-shaking emotions. There's so much more to homosexual love than sex.

When I remember my love, I think of intimate conversations; two heads bent together studying a small seashell; lying in bed late on Sundays with the coffee pot, TV and Sunday paper; dressing up together and stepping out now and then, knowing we made a striking pair and laughing at befuddled males; walking in the house after a long work day with contentment flooding over the tension and the tiredness; not being able to afford a whole dozen red roses, so I bought just one, and she cried.

Lobotomies, electroshock therapy, aversion therapy and chemotherapy have often been employed as "cures" for "homosexuals" in state and federal prisons. Concerned activists and their (few) allies among mental health professionals have had some success in getting the courts to prohibit such forms of "cruel and unusual punishment." It is only slightly reassuring to know that psychosurgery, for example, cannot legally be performed without the "informed consent" of the "patient"/prisoner. However, psychological coercion, including drugging, is still a primary method of controlling "undesirable"

behavior. And just as the tradition in this country's prisons was to segregate African Americans, so have "homosexuals" often been separated from other prisoners. It is a tradition, in most societies, to isolate those who are feared.

Annie: When I was at the Los Angeles County Jail they had a "Daddy Tank" where they put all the women they think are lesbians in the same cell block. They crowd two or three women into cells built for one. Women in the Daddy Tank can't have contact with any of the other women in the jail, can't go anywhere without an escort, have to sit in the back row if there's a movie. All the Daddy Tank women are assigned to the laundry night shift. You're totally ostracized, night and day. And you always have to be careful to not have any physical contact with each other, not even holding hands.

I figured that if these nazis are so opposed to us, we must be okay. How can you respect the opinions of people who are so uptight and cruel, always hassling, accusing, talking obscene, looking for new ways to punish you, taking your good time, putting you in solitary — the whole bit. It was pretty obvious to me that the guards in that jail were the ones who were really sick. They said I was sick because I wanted to be close to my friend, and since she was the one person who I knew really cared about me in there, it just didn't make any sense. I admit I had my own funny ideas about homosexuals before I went to jail that first time. I had to learn the hard way that it's not homosexuals who are sick and hung up around sex; it's the ignorant people who are out to get them.

Nonetheless, "staff" is responsible for deciding whether and when to punish a woman for engaging in "Physical Contact," the official sign that "homosexuality" might be lurking just around the corner.

Rosanna: Homosexuality is technically against all rules, oral sex will get you three years tacked onto your time. But any PC—physical contact—can be considered homsexual by the staff. I'd been close to the same partner for over a year before they busted us one day for being in a "compromising" position. We were sitting on the steps talking, with our arms on each other's shoulders. If they'd been on the ball, they could have caught us long ago in a real compromising situation. They're lazy about it, at least some of them some of the time. It's like they wait 'til they're in a bad mood, and then they start busting everybody. We touch each other all the time, all of us. It's nice. But it's an easy thing for them to catch somebody in a PC, and it's a handy threat for them to always be holding over our heads.

Each time a prison rule is broken by one or more prisoners, the staff is supposed to write up a report. A "write-up" is equivalent to police arrest, and depending on the seriousness of the "crime," it is considered either a misdemeanor or a prison felony. Physical Contact in prison is a felony action. If a woman is written up, her punishment will be determined at a disciplinary hearing.

There are many rules within a prison and there are many prisoners. It is not possible for the harried staff to observe and write up every rule infraction. Write-ups are made arbitrarily and erratically.

A woman who is written up for Physical Contact may simply be scolded and warned that the next time she will be severely punished. She may be ordered to avoid all contact with her close friend. She may be sent to solitary confinement, i.e., rack. She may be required to be "counseled" by a chaplain or psychologist, who may attempt to "help" her understand her "sinfulness" or her "sickness," whether or not she wishes to be "saved" or "cured." To help women overcome their "wickedness" or "deviance," some of these male "counselors" may offer "sex therapy." The most serious threat or punishment is loss of good time or time added to the original sentence.

Susan: Either you throw abandon to the wind and hope you don't get caught — you never know when the pig's gonna walk down the hall and make a surprise check — or you have a pinner. A pinner is somebody who sits out in the hall, and when the cop starts walking down the hall, she whistles or gives some other high sign that tells you you have about 20 seconds to get up and be presentable. Which means you're never completely naked, you're never able to just relax in each other's arms, to get completely involved in making love. There is always the tension involved. But people manage in spite of it. Women are able to comfort each other emotionally and physically. To hold each other, to touch and be gentle and listen and care. To love each other. In a prison situation that is a very beautiful thing.

Everybody knows what a relationship is, and sex is not the primary part of any relationship, and it isn't in prison either. Sex is a very improtant part of a relationship—when all the barriers are gone, and you're really exposed to another person. But what is more primary is the friendship, how you share dealing with the world.

Somebody to face this madness with.

Trust and loyalty between close friends can be severely tested by the constant threat and danger which accompany intimacy inside prison. However, the challenges a woman faces in forming bonds with other women, both in and out of prison, can also be strengthening. Nowadays, when a woman is released from prison, there is a women's community that awaits her.

Gino: Ten years ago I was thrown in jail three times for wearing "men's" clothes. Now I wear what I want and no one's busting me for it, and I attribute the change to women on the streets who have been fighting for women's rights, for lesbian rights. It was real hard when I first came out of prison, it's always real hard. But getting in touch with the women's movement has made a big difference to me, and I'm so happy it's come about. Job resources, health care, women's coffee-houses — there was never anyplace like that before. Now there's a whole community. I used to have to sneak around to be a lesbian, and it was just like being in prison. Now I can be a lesbian and still deal with men at work, and it's great to be able to do that. Equal rights means that now I can get a job working with machinery, working with and beside men, and it's okay. I know we've got a long way to go, and whether you're a convict or a free sister, we've all got our work cut out for us. But the war's on, so fasten your seat belts.

Karlene's Journal: Spring 1973

Yesterday, I was called to an urgent meeting with the warden and three of her highest ranking subordinates. Staff had reported to them that I've been observed kissing women (prisoners) who greet my arrivals at the institution, and the nervous administrators wondered if I realize the seriousness of such behavior. I tried to explain that where I come from kisses and embraces are healthy and natural exchanges of affection, but they reminded me of the institution's firm rules and warned me to use better judgment in the future.

People die from not being loved, and from not loving, and unloved and unloving people become dead social weight long before they meet the grave. When such people are in positions of power, they endanger our lives and our freedoms. Moral responsibility demands that we protect ourselves against them and their ideas. As I listened to the prison authorities reprimand me, I felt sad for them. I could feel no love from them, only fear. And I rejoiced in my heart for the hundreds of women I had known in their prisons who would never be so firmly imprisoned as the keepers of the keys.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai (#17, 1981)

Taking Back My Night

I. There are nights when the fear drifts like fog when there is no one here no one but me. I dread the walking in the dark fantasize the shapes of men white as death stalking me. I hold my breath when I open the door and lock it behind me to shut out what was or what might be.

I stroke my quilt, the quilt left abandoned in a stall triangles of black, deep red, blue given me by women who loved each other, made by some unknown woman from necessity and flour sacks.

I wonder what child woke, afraid under that quilt and if a woman woke, afraid beneath a man quick to anger.

I remember a child waking hot with fever and pain like a needle through the ear with every heartbeat, huge, invisible: I remember standing in the bed screaming into the dark where there was no help, no answer.

I learned familiar things changed in the dark: even the glass of milk by the bed turned to poison over night. Familiar face turned monster: I woke, afraid, hearing the monster stumbling down the hall

to punish me.

I woke to run, to hide
under the bed, under the table,
if I were quick,
if I slept light,
if there were enough light
to see where to run.

I learned vampires wore black capes and fled the dawn.
Evil witches wore black and had dark hair.
Gentle Cinderella was blond, like the good fairies.
I loved Snow White because her hair was dark like mine.

In church I learned about horns of light, shining souls, the valley of the shadow, seeing through a glass darkly, cast into outer darkness: God, he created light and found it good. At school I learned about bright ideas, bright students, Dark Ages, the dark night of the soul, the Dark Continent. Everywhere I learned little white lies, free white and twenty-one, blackmail, blacklist, blacken his reputation, black sheep, black as the grave, Darkies.

My grandmother wanted me to be a pale lady. I tried; then I tried to kill myself. I learned hell is very bright.

I decided to live; I decided to live well. I decided not to be a lady; I decided to live beyond the pale.

II. Here we walk holding hands
without light
we guide ourselves
by the feel of the path
by the darker
patterns of trees against the sky.
Sometimes I close my eyes
learning to trust myself to find the way
learning to trust my loves to guide me.

I have to trust the dark to garden.
I lay down the sheets of straw,
the old hay, the gathered leaves
between the plants. Beneath the mulch
the worms make earth rich
and all the sweetness of the world begins.
I feed the worms, and celebrate
as they multiply, and remember
I will feed them again, and better,
someday.

I have to trust the dark.
When we go to the garden
each morning we find
tomatoes ripened overnight.
The pear trees are heavy, breaking;
we pick the fruit and carefully
wrap each one to sweeten
away from sun.
At last on the kitchen shelves
the jars glow in shadowed peace
where light will not steal color.

When daylight fades my tired body praises the shorter day bringing rest. Long winter nights are the goal, the reward, the time to recover from the bright hard times.

III. I sit reading by the fire:
the abolitionist writes
the dark races are more intuitive
gentle not good at math.
The philosopher declares
the dark side, the yin
is cold and feminine.
The rabbi contrasts
Sabbath white and pure with Lilith
dark and evil, who refused to be laid
down, Lilith made of earth
and kept beyond the outer wall.

I am thinking about women wearing veils and wigs and rings and words hidden so men can stay bright and pure.

The definition of what we are is will they kill us for it? have they ever not killed us for it?

Watching sparks rise I remember the smell of sizzling hair when my brother set the match to mine.

I read that in a certain village the pyres seared against the black magic cat knowledge til one woman left alone watched the men for enlightenment.

I remember a picture from my father's state: a ring of white space around a charred black body whose first crime was being dark;

the white men stood with rope and torch making proud offering open to the camera.

Later in an eastern paper city under a sudden August sun women ran with flaming hair to a river already boiling.

I watch the flames rise remembering all the bright final solutions.

Some nights we hear dogs calling on the hills.

We know men can change their mind about their game.

My love dreams that they are hunting here; she dreams that they are hunting us.

Where we share common fate and cause there we may also choose a new definition: in the darkness, she rises strong and free and finds it good.

Tonight I will walk in darkness feeling my way home by the curve of the earth feeling my way to sleep by the curve of a woman. If I wake in the night she will soothe me. If the men in white come she will not desert me.

I have to trust the dark.
I have to trust myself.
I am learning to love myself.
I have not let them kill me;
I have not let myself die.
I am still learning to walk where I am afraid.

Marilyn Frye (#6, 1978)

from Some Reflections on Separatism and Power

...In my life, and within feminism as I understand it, separatism is not a theory or a doctrine, nor a demand for certain specific beaviors on the part of feminists, thought it is undeniably connected with lesbianism. Feminism seems to me to be kaleidoscopic — something whose shapes, structures and patterns alter with every turn of feminist creativity; and one element which is present through all the changes is an element of separation. ... The theme of separation, in its multitude variations, is there in everything from divorce to exclusive lesbian separatist communities, from shelters for battered women to witch covens, from women's studies programs to women's bars, from expansion of day-care to abortion on demand. The presence of this theme is vigorously obscured, trivialized, mystified and outright denied by many feminist apologists, who seem to find it embarrassing, while it is embraced, explored, expanded and ramified by most of the more inspiring theorists and activists. ... What is it about separation, in any or all of its many forms and degrees, that makes it so basic and so sinister, so exciting and so repellent?

Feminist separation is, of course, 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. (Masculist separatism is the partial segregation of women from men and male

domains at the will of men. This difference is crucial.)...

Most feminists, probably all, practice some separation from males and male—dominated institutions. A separatist practices separation consciously, systematically, and probably more generally than the others, and advocates thorough and "broad—spectrum" separation as part of the conscious strategy of liberation. And, contrary to the image of the separatist as a cowardly escapist, hers is the life and program which inspires the greatest hostility, disparagement, insult and confrontation and generally she is the one against whom economic sanctions operate most conclusively....The penalties for being a lesbian are ostracism, harrassment and job-insecurity or joblessness. The penalty for rejecting men's sexual advances is often rape, and

perhaps even more often forfeit of such things as professional or job opportunities. And the separatist lives with the added burden of being assumed by many to be a morally depraved man-hating bigot. But there is a clue here: if you are doing something that is so strictly forbidden by the patriarchs, you must be doing something right. ...

Men are drained and depleted by their living by themselves and with and among other men....The ministrations of women, be they willing or unwilling, free or paid for, are what restore in men the strength, will, and confidence to go on with what they call living....

Male parasitism means that males *must have access* to women; it is the Patriarchal Imperative....Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access....

Hence, heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood, which are the institutions which most obviously and individually maintain female accessibility to males, form the core triad of anti–feminist ideology; and all–woman spaces, all–woman organizations, all–woman meetings, all–woman classes, are outlawed, suppressed, harassed, ridiculed, and punished, in the name of that other fine and enduring patriarchal institution, Sex Equality.

To some of us these issues can almost seem foreign ...strange ones to be occupying center stage. We are busily engaged in what seem to us our blatant insubordinations: living our own lives, taking care of ourselves and one another, doing our work, and in particular, telling it as we see it. Still, the original sin is the separation which these presuppose, and it is that, not our art or philosophy, not our speechmaking, nor our "sexual acts" (or abstinences), for which we will be persecuted, when worse comes to worst.

The full text of both "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power" and "To Be and Be Seen: Metaphysical Misogyny" (on pp. 185-188) can be found in Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983).

Adrienne Rich (#18, 1981)

from Notes for A Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?

•••• Is there a term, separatism, which most lesbian feminists would recognize and acknowledge in some kind of general agreement as to its definition?... What follows is not an attempt at comprehensive history; these are merely notes, by one white woman trying to think clearly...

What had become necessary [by the end of the '60s], and necessitated separation from the male political movements, was a restating of ... issues from a woman–identified point of view, as well as a stating for the first time of issues never before perceived as political — heterosexuality, women's unpaid work in the home, childbirth, language itself.

The process of creating an autonomous white women's movement has been long and strenuously objected to by the left, Republicans, Democrats, labor unions, the "new Right," churches, universities, etc. Women of color were forming their own separate political groups early on, but these were not — to my knowledge — described as "separatist."

...In 1971 twelve white women of both working— and middle—class origins formed a collective in Washington, D.C., defining themselves as lesbian—feminist separatists, and soon founded *The Furies*, a paper devoted to lesbian—feminist thought and politics. Similar groups formed in a number of other cities. According to a founding member of the Furies, the central concern of lesbian—feminist—separatism at this point was neither civil rights for lesbians nor the promotion of lesbian culture; it was "the recognition that in a male—supremacist society, heterosexuality is a political institution." Lesbian separatism had become a necessity because heterosexual feminists accused lesbians of hostility and man—hating when they tried to raise the issue of "the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality" as it bolsters male supremacism; and lesbian—feminists decided to continue this analysis among themselves.

... Apartheid, segregation, the European ghetto, the Indian reservation: constructs of the "superior" group to ensure it will not be "mongrelized" by the "inferior"; to keep the other powerless. Compulsory heterosexuality, exclusion, invisibility, silence: constructs of the male group to deprive women of both identity and autonomy.

¹Charlotte Bunch, "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," Ms., November 1976.

Separatism of Jews, of Black Nationalists, of women: those defined as less "human" than their definers, as "outside," are not only forced into but can choose separation: the negative judgment turned around, the claiming of one's identity and community as an act of resistance.

As soon as we leave a white, European frame of reference, we find cross—culturally many examples of women claiming control of rights of access: secret political societies and economic alliances (Africa), marriage—resistance sisterhoods (China), or women—only spaces such as the *jilimi* of the Aboriginal tribes in the Australian desert.

Some questions that come to mind:

For many white women ... there was a horrible after-taste to the 1960s—having to do with the leftist cult of masculinity and violence and its usage of women in the name of "sexual liberation."... If the white lesbian/feminist chooses not to work in coalitions with men, does she also become unable to grasp the different choices of the woman of color, under white racism, to maintain survival connection with her racial community of origin — males included? Can the complexity and courage of each position be honored, its radicalism understood?

...An act of separation, separateness, can also be an act of connection. An all-female space is not definable simply as a space from which males are excluded. It can also be — though it is not always — a space where women who have not heard each other before bear witness (Sarah Hoagland's phrase) in each other's presence and describe themselves to each other, forging new strands of trust and new possibilities of movement.

Is the actual practice of separatism dynamic and evolving ... or conformist and static ...?

In trying to come to some clearer view of what *separatism* means, I have realized that for me, at least, theory and practice are constantly tugging at each other, often entangled with each other, but they are by no means the same. I find myself wondering if perhaps the real question at issue is not separatism itself but how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it is practiced, and to what degree any act of separation is more than an act of withdrawing from difference with whose pain we can choose not to engage.

Responses

February 3, 1982

Dear Adrienne,

I'm writing to express my concerns in response to your article, Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean? which appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* 18.

I have two major criticisms of the article. The first is that there is no explicit statement in the article that explains why the debate over separatism is being conceived of in racial terms. No analytical rationale is provided which says why pro-separatism is associated with white women and anti-separatism is associated with women of color throughout. Even though readers may have ideas prior to reading the article about how racial identity affects one's allegiance or non-allegiance to separatism, by not stating your reasons for exploring separatism in relationship to race, you do not take responsibility for confronting the dichotomy your article sets up by implication and create a situation that is ripe for drawing racist conclusions.

My other major criticism is that definitions or theories of separatism are not differentiated from the actual practice of it. Theory and practice, words and actions are very different things. Although at the very end of the article you make this crucial and valid point: "I find myself wondering if perhaps the real question at issue is not separatism itself but how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it is practiced ..." (p. 90), you do not clearly confront the implications of this question in the article itself. Instead you begin the article with the suggestion that the reason that separatists and non-separatists have conflicts with each other

is that they simply do not have an "agreed-on meaning" ...

The splits between separatists and non-separatists, specifically between white Lesbian separatists and women of color, have not emerged because there is not a common understanding of terms, but because of how separatism has been practiced in fact.... Many women of color, including myself, who are strong feminists have observed how a Lesbian separatist stance has led to an isolated, single-issued understanding and practice of politics, which ignores the range of oppressions that women experience. No amount of developing definitions will change what Lesbian separatism has come to mean in practice, although altered practice could very well change the connotation of the term "Lesbian separatist." Beverly Smith's and my dialogue from *This Bridge Called My Back*, which also appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* 18, and other pieces in *This Bridge* explore criticisms

of the ideology and practice of separatism in detail. A recent article, "Nidishenok (sisters)" by Chrystos in *Maenad*, Winter 1982, perceptively explores the theory and practice of separatism from a Native

American woman's perspective.

...Perhaps the intention of separatists originally was to keep antiracist, anti-capitalist, and anti-war issues at the forefront, but it is documentable that this usually did not occur. Oppression in a Lesbian separatist context began to be defined solely as Lesbian oppression, white Lesbian at that. Undoubtedly some separatists maintained their commitment to anti-racist organizing, for example, but it was most likely difficult to put this commitment into practice if they were operating solely in an all white women's context, when most anti-racist organizing was actually being done in situations which included men.

There is also the fact that many younger women who have embraced separatism have *never* been involved in the Civil Rights, Black Liberation, and anti-war movements and do not have concrete experiences in doing these kinds of political work. Their first and only movement was the women's movement which has been functionally

white....

The lack of an analysis of how racial identity and Lesbian separatism are and are not connected has a specifically disturbing result in the article. This is the way that a separatist position, chosen on the basis of sexual identity, and racial separation, imposed as the result of institutionalized racial segregation, are made to seem similar and to spring from the same impulses, ignoring the history and politics of

this country and the element of choice.

For example, you cite the early Black women's groups that Toni Cade Bambara writes about in The Black Woman, published in 1970, and say: "Women of color were forming their own separate political groups early on, but these were not-to my knowledge-described as 'separatist." The implication of this sentence is "But they could be considered separatist, even if no one said it." This totally negates the motivations and actual historical circumstances under which these groups were formed. It's unlikely that these women decided that their groups would exclude white women as an ideological stance. They didn't have to. Black women and white women were having very little to do with each other then, just as now. The friendship networks that no doubt made possible this organizing would naturally be Black and although some of these women might have been nationalists, i.e., racial separatists, the fact that the society itself is racially segregated must have contributed much to the composition of these groups. Such groups would also not have conceived of themselves or be labeled separatists in the Lesbian sense because they did not view themselves as a part of the women's movement and would therefore not adopt its terminology, not to mention the fact that the women in them were

probably mostly heterosexual.

I want to say here that I am definitely aware that there are some women of color who now define themselves as separatists in the Lesbian separatist sense. There are also Third World women, both Lesbians and non-Lesbians, who are racial separatists and believe in only associating and working with members of their specific ethnic groups. Just as I question the limits of a Lesbian separatist stance, I also question the limitations of racial separatism, particularly when it perpetuates negative responses to difference. The real need for autonomous organizing by members of oppressed groups should in no way lead to a position that encourages bias against others or prevents

principled coalitions from occurring.

Collapsing the realities of racial and sexual politics comes up again in the article when you discuss Conditions: Five, The Black Women's Issue and This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color as examples of "separation" by women of color, again implying that they might indeed be thought of as separatist. ... As a co-editor of Conditions: Five and a contributor to This Bridge Called My Back, I am positive that the impulse for creating each of these works was not a separatist one, either racially or sexually. You say about Conditions: Five, "But it was also an act of making the art and thought of radical Black women visible to a new audience, not only feminist and not only Black." And it should be added, not only female. The same can be said about the audience and inclusiveness of This Bridge. Yes, these works were done primarily to reach Third World women, but there was also the hope that other people would learn from them too and put what they had learned into practice by actually fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression. The very effectiveness of these two publications as tools for organizing lies in their wide distribution to diverse audiences.

Third World women's continued insistence on coalition politics is the result of knowing that we don't have the power to turn this thing around alone, and also that as long as racism, sexism, and class oppression exist within progressive movements as well as in the world at large, the chances for our survival are extremely limited.

The theory and practice of separatism and how these relate to racism, anti-racism, and racial identity are very complex issues well worth analyzing. Having spoken and written about this subject in the past I thought it was important to raise the criticisms and questions which your article suggested. I hope that my comments are productive both to you and to *Sinister Wisdom*'s readers.

Sincerely,

Barbara Smith

Dear Editors:

I, and many of my Separatist friends, had a mixed reaction to the article "What Does Separatism Mean?" in the last issue of SW. At first I let out a sigh of relief that, unlike most articles on Separatism by Lesbians who do not define themselves as such, it was not overtly hostile, or even inaccurate.

But something about it really irritated me. The major problem I had with it was its falsely neutral tone. I have yet to meet a Lesbian who is at all political who does not have strong opinions on the subject. Certainly not the author of this article, who has been quoted elsewhere ... calling Separatists "cut off" and politically ineffective.

In any event, no one comes to a conclusion about, or an understanding of, any philosophy/strategy by lining up things that wimmin who hold that view have said on one side, and what those who do not have said on the other, and then somehow weighing each for truth-value. It would be absurd to take quotes from random communists on one hand, and random capitalists on the other, and come to some conclusion about whether communism is a worthwhile vision from that. ...

Just because the fine details of our analysis may vary slightly with each different Lesbian, and drastically across the whole movement, doesn't mean that we're confused about what we're doing. In fact, I think it's a good sign that we're all thinking for ourselves enough to disagree. Even though there have been incredibly wrenching, painful episodes between Separatists, compared to communists, we are relatively unified!

Yes, it's true: Separatists are not perfect. But all of us are courageous, unique and creative. I honor even those Separatists I dislike and disagree with for these qualities. To say no to men and male institutions, and to give our full love and attention to Lesbians, is

immensely difficult, and immeasurably rewarding.

The article feels to me like a challenge to a debate between non-Separatist Lesbian-Feminists and Lesbian Separatists. But there is a great power imbalance in this debate. The moderator, and the forum itself, is non-Separatist. The forum is open to men and straight wimmin as audience members, and therefore closed to Separatists who deny access to our writing to the enemy.

And, I'm sick of Separatists always being called on to explain and justify our position, anyway. Why are we, in most communities in the u.s., expected to compromise our Separatist principles and work on co-ed events and campaigns, by Lesbians who would never dream of compromising their humanist principles to work on Lesbian-only or wimmin-only projects?

It's time for non-Separatist Lesbians to start explaining yourselves. What does it mean to not be a Separatist in "our" movement? What is your strategy for the defeat of patriarchy over the long haul? What is the goal of your struggle? Can you honor the choice of Separatist wimmin of color not to work with men? Is it racist not to be a Separatist; not to withdraw your support from patriarchy, not to fight for an anti-racist Lesbian-identified culture? Is the actual practice of non-Separatist Lesbian-Feminism as dynamic and evolving as it sounds in Audre Lorde's or the author's own work, or as conformist and static as the N.O.W. Sexuality Task Force Newsletter? Where and how do "we" make the distinction between Lesbian-Feminism and namby-pamby liberal humanism?

Sidney Spinster

Lois Anne Addison (#21, 1982)

from Separatism Revisited

...I do not understand what [Rich] has in mind by "kinds of conscious identity" and I strongly disagree with her assumption that built into every act of separation is an act of withdrawing from pain.

Separating from males was simply the easiest act of my life. Differences that we choose not to deal with can be many things besides painful ... for instance they can be a source of frustration — a waste of time to try to sort out. They can be a distraction....

When I first called myself a separatist in 1970, there was no great body of writing ... It wasn't ideology. It was activity! In becoming a separatist I made enormously powerful and energy—giving decisions. I not only broke with males — I basically broke with my whole former life connections. I WANTED TO DO IT. It was not imposed from outside or from on high and it was not done for the sake of being "pure." It was done in the process of living and fighting. I do not regret those separations.

When I became a separatist, the main question that we asked had to do with who you would work with ... a "separating" kind of question. We were trying to gain that separate space ... a space where we could do our work. What our work was — what concerns — what would get done in that space that separation would provide was a complete unknown. I was a separatist because I fought for and gained that space. I am no longer a "separatist" because I am not interested in what has been planted and is nurtured in that space ... (e.g. discussions focused on goddess, matriarchy, parthenogenesis, genetic inferiority of males, world without males, primacy of sexism/heterosexism in the list of oppressions, self-sufficient lesbian separatist colonies).

from To Be and Be Seen: Metaphysical Misogyny

••• If indeed lesbians' existence is not countenanced by the dominant conceptual scheme, it would follow that we could not construct a definition of the term "lesbian" of the sort we might recommend to well-intentioned editors of dictionaries. If a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will not be adequate.... In order to get a handle on this we need to explore the differences and the connections between the erasure of

women generally and the erasure of lesbians. ...

The notion that les bianism is not possible in nature, that it is no body's nature to be a lesbian, has a life of its own ... if someone lives as a lesbian it is not assumed that that is just who, or how, she is, but that it is some sort of affliction, or is a result of failed attempts to solve some sort of problem or resolve some sort of conflict (and if she could find another way, she would take it, and then would not be a lesbian). Being a lesbian is understood as something which could be nobody's natural configuration but must be a configuration one is twisted into by some sort of force which is in some basic sense "external" to one. "Being a lesbian" is understood here as certain sorts of people understand "being a delinquent" or "being an alcoholic." It is not of one's nature the way illness is not of one's nature. To see this sense of "unnatural" one can contrast it with the presumed "naturalness" of the heterosexuality of women. As most people see it, being heterosexual is just being. It is not interpreted. It is not understood as a consequence of anything. It is not viewed as possibly a solution to some problem, or as way of acting and feeling which one worked out or was pushed to by circumstances. On this sort of view, all women are heterosexual, and some women somehow come to act otherwise. On this view, no one is... a lesbian....

One's choice, then, when confronted with someone who says she is a lesbian, is to believe her and class her as not fully or really human, or to class her as fully and really human and not believe she is a lesbian....

When one says that some thing or some class is not countenanced by a certain conceptual scheme... there are at least three things this can mean. One is just that there is no simple direct term in the system for the thing or class, and no very satisfactory way to explain it. For example, it is in this sense that Western conceptual schemes do not countenance the forces or arrangements called "Karma." Indeed, I don't know whether it is suitable to say "forces or arrangements" here, and that is part of the point. A second thing that can be meant ...

is that the term which ostensibly denotes the thing is internally selfcontradictory, as in the case of round squares.... A third thing one can mean when one says a scheme does not encompass a certain thing is that according to principles which are fundamental to the most general picture of how things are in the world, the thing could not exist in nature. An example of this is the denial that there could be a beast which was a cross between a dog and a cat. The belief that such a thing could exist would be inconsistent with beliefs about the nature of the world and of animals.... Lesbian is the only class I have ever set out to define, the only concept I have ever set out to explain, that seemed to be shut out in more than one of these ways, and as the considerations reviewed here seem to show, it is shut out in all three. You can "not believe in lesbians" as you don't believe in the possibility of "doggie-cats" or as you don't believe in round squares; or you can be just unable to accommodate lesbianism in the way many of us cannot accommodate the notion of Karma....

The redundancy of the devices of closure which are in place here is one of the things which leads me to say that lesbians are excluded from the scheme. The overdetermination here, the metaphysical overkill, signals a manipulation, a scurrying to erase, to divert the eye, the attention, the mind. Where there is manipulation, there is motivation, and it does not seem plausible to me that the reason lies with the physical details of certain women's private lives. The meaning of this erasure and of the totality and conclusiveness of it has to do, I think, with the maintenance of phallocratic reality as a whole, and with the

situation of women generally apropos that reality....

But while women are erased in history and in speculation, physically liquidated in gynocidal purges and banished from the community of those with perceptual and semantic authority, we are on the other hand regularly and systematically invited, seduced, cajoled, coerced, and even paid to be in intimate and constant association with men and their projects. In this, the situation of women generally is radically different from the situation of lesbians. Lesbians are not invited to join — the family, the party, the project, the procession, the war effort. There is a place for a woman in every game: wife, secretary, servant, prostitute, daughter, janitor, assistant, babysitter, mistress, seamstress, proofreader, cook, nurse, confidante, masseuse, indexer, typist, mother. Any of these is a place for a woman, and women are much encouraged to fill them. None of these is a place for a lesbian.

The exclusion of women from the phallocratic scheme is impressive, frightening, and often fatal, but it is not simple and absolute. Women's existence is both absolutely necessary to and irresolvably problematic for the dominant reality.... Women's existence is a background against which phallocratic reality is a foreground.... I

imagine phallocratic reality to be the space and figures and motion which constitute the foreground, and the constant repetitive uneventful activities of women to constitute and maintain the background against which this foreground plays. It is essential to the maintenance of the foreground reality that nothing within it refer in any way to anything in the background and yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background. It is useful to carry this metaphor on in a more concrete mode — thinking of phallocratic reality as a dramatic production on a stage....

All eyes, all attention, all attachment must be focused on the play, which is Phallocratic Reality.... The ever-present potential for cosmological disaster lies with the background. There is nothing in the nature of the background that disposes it to be appropriately tame; it is not made to serve the foreground, it is just there. It therefore is part of the vocation of phallocratic loyalists to police attention. They must make it radically impossible to attend to anything in the background; they must make it impossible to think it possible to fasten one's eye on

anything in the background.

We can deduce from this understanding of the motivation, what it is that phallocratic loyalists are motivated to forbid conceiving. What must not be conceived is a seer for whom the background is eventful, dramatic, compelling — whose attention fastens upon stagehands and their projects. The loyalists cannot just identify such seers and kill them, for that would focus the loyalists' own attention on the criminal, hence the crime, hence the object of the crime, and that

would interrupt the loyalists' own attention to Reality....

If the lesbian sees the woman, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. With this, there is a flowering of possibilities. The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she *can* be seen; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception. With this, there enters for the woman the logical possibility of assuming her authority as a perceiver and of shifting her own attention. With that there is the dawn of choice, and it opens out over the whole world of women. The lesbian's seeing undercuts the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for women was to be rendered *automatic*. The non-existence of lesbians is a piece in the mechanism which is supposed to cut off the possibility of choice or alternative at the root, namely at the point of conception.

The maintenance of phallocratic reality requires that the attention of women be focused on men and men's projects—the play; and that attention not be focused on women—the stagehands. Womanloving, as a spontaneous and habitual orientation of attention, is then, both directly and indirectly inimical to the maintenance of that reality. And therein lies the reason for the thoroughness of the ontological

closure against lesbians, the power of those closed out, and perhaps the key to the liberation of women from oppression in a maledominated culture....

Insofar as I am making claims, they are these: Lesbians are outside the conceptual scheme, and this is something done, not just the way things are. One can begin to see that lesbians are excluded by the scheme, and that this is *motivated*, when one begins to see what purpose the exclusion might serve in connection with keeping women generally in their metaphysical place. It is also true that lesbians are in a position to see things that cannot be seen from within the system. What lesbians see is central to what makes them lesbians and their seeing is why they have to be excluded. Lesbians are woman-seers. Upon coming to see women, one is spat summarily out of reality, through a cognitive gap and into negative semantic space. If you ask what became of such a woman, you may be told she became a lesbian, and if you try to find out what a lesbian is, you will be told there is no such thing.

But there is.



Philospher, Marilyn Frye (18" 18", oil) Jan Hansen (#14, 1980)

Letter — 10/6/81

Dear Michelle,

It was so sad not to see you at the Women in Print conference. Your voice was missed by me and many others.... The conference was filled with emotional roller coasters for me. Coming by myself was a difficult thing to do. I am so shy and filled with imaginary terrors about so many things. First off, to know that there were other women of color, but how to introduce myself; how to let them know that the woman with the light skin and the eager look on her face, wanted to align herself with them, wanted them to know "it's in my blood, it's in the way I sweat." Would they accept me? Would I feel the community I hunger and dream about?

That night I stood and introduced myself as a Mohawk/white/half-breed. I am shaking inside. Denise is not there to hold my hand. My father, my Grandmother are not there to prove what I say — yes, I come from a dark-skinned people whose eyes are black and deep. I am a sport, a mutant within my family. Do these women believe who

I am? Why do I care if white women believe me?

The next day Cherríe and Gloria and Mirtha and Juanita give a workshop on Third World Women writers. Gloria talks about La Malinche and the fear of every Chicana woman of betraying her people. I understand this betrayal. Every time I pick up my pen, that fear stops me, makes me water down my words, makes me hold back the power. I am so afraid of telling the secrets that are locked inside. The secrets of my family, the secrets of my people, and, yes, the secrets of myself; how I feel about being the light one, the pampered one, the "favorite" one. Must I face the fact that part of the reason I was favored by my Grandpa was because of my blonde hair, my blue eyes? That tiny, dark man who taught me Mohawk, who told me ancient stories, called me "our masterpiece," and it is time I knew that for him, for Grandma, there was a satisfaction in knowing I would never be hassled like they were, never be called "nigger." The betrayal they must have felt is more than I can imagine.

After the workshop I went to introduce myself to Cherríe. We cried in each other's arms. La Guëra standing face to face. Gloria came over and wept with us. I feel so alone, Michelle!! Always I carry this

loneliness around me, like a shawl. It covers me and protects me also. For a few moments, the shawl was thrown off and I was revealed as a woman of color to my sisters. There were no questions asked. I was not interrogated like white women do to me. I was me, Beth Brant, a woman who identifies with who I am. Forty years of tears were being shed in the circle of protective sisters. They invited me to a party that night. For the rest of the day I fought with myself inside. Do they really like me? Will they think I am cashing in emotionally on what seems sometimes to be a "trend" in our movement? Racism — anti-racism. It's on every woman's lips. Is it in every woman's heart? I wonder. I wonder. I had a talk with a Black woman who told me her daughter would be so happy to look like me. This I know. My skin that sets me apart from my own, has given me assumptive privilege. Of course, this privilege can always be taken away, be smashed. My father worked in a factory. During the organizing of the union, how many times was he beaten? How many times did the goons choose him for his dark skin? We know the answer, don't we? I guess this is how I feel. My skin has been the tool with which I have beaten myself. It has been the weapon that has separated me from my own and from other women. I dare not trust! For, who is liking me because they think I am white, like them? Who is mistrusting me, because they think I am white, unlike them? A lot of colored women were using the word schizophrenia. This is true. I know you feel it too, Michelle. It's not just a matter of living in two worlds. It's knowing we can and have adjusted to the world we hate. The white world, filled with white people who hate us, who want us to leave things alone. Pass for white, pass for hetero; don't be different, don't identify with our own kind, don't speak about racism from the heart. Leave it in the air, as a subject or topic to use when things get dull. Leave it to float from space to space, never filling the imagination with power or anger. I weep as I write this. I am frightened by what is not said or felt in this movement we align ourselves with. But, of course, I can't imagine it being otherwise. Feminism is my hope, our hope. There is no other way to see the truth, than through feminist eyes.

I went to the party. It was silly and fun and real. I wore my beaded turtle, as if it were an amulet. Also I know I wear it as a sign—see me. I am an Indian woman, I am one of you. (Or, I am *not* one of you, in the case of white women.) The feeling of being in the room with Latinas, Black women, as a belonger, not an outsider. It was good, Michelle. The loneliness subsided. I went back to my own room at 2:00

in the morning and cried again. I have shed so many tears this past weekend! Perhaps I feel the salt water will wash me clean and brave. My Tarot cards always come up with the Strength card. It is a bridging card. Bridging soul and body. I have never felt comfortable with it, but

now I think about it, laying in bed, not sleeping.

The next day, a workshop that opens the conference up. Mab and Cris from Feminary, talking heartfully about being Southern white women, what that means in their quest for anti-racism in their lives. I was very moved by Mab. She spoke about there being no Indians in the South because we were either killed or driven west. Hattie was on the panel and spoke of her sisterhood with working-class women, her expectations from working-class women. I'm sure Adrienne filled you in on the details of what was said. When the unfortunate woman from the bookstore began her rap, it was apparent to me it was going to be horrible. I prayed for her to shut up. The things she said! Oh God, how many times have we sat and listened to it? - "You should," "they," "women of color need to know they're not invisible," "racism is a problem that should be dealt with." How many times have we said the same things, in our light skin? My shame for her was mingled with my shame for myself. I was sitting with the colored contingent. We were rude, talking and whispering and giggling. At one point we thought of walking out en masse.

It was so difficult to speak up. At last some white women asked her for clarification and not to speak in such generalities. Michelle, it was obvious something was going to happen. A Latina woman stood up and said, "We don't want your separate bookshelves, we don't want your pictures of us hanging in your windows, and don't defend yourself because we don't want to hear it." My heart was beating, thumping. Tears were forming in my eyes again and again. D.J. asked the white woman how could she be sure that the "handful" of colored women who visited her bookstore were the only ones. "Look at the women in this row. We are all different, all colors, all shades. Don't be too sure that the woman you think is white, is not really colored." More tears, more burning in the throat. Woman after woman, standing up and speaking. White women not apologizing, for once. White women giving support to the woman on the panel, while addressing her racism. Something new. I want to speak but my tongue is tied. I want to tell the white women in the room about my father's graduation from college. The first one, you know? It was a big event. Relatives from Canada coming. Old Indian men in rusty suits with

incredibly starched collars and cuffs on their white shirts. Old Indian women in print rayon dresses, wearing black oxfords and heavy cotton stockings. Hats on their heads. Small straw pillboxes with veils.

We arrive at the auditorium. I am thirteen years old, embarrassed by everything and everyone, as usual. We are a different looking lot. I imagine everyone's eyes are on us, this obviously Indian-looking family. But I am so proud of my father, too. I am at war with myself, as usual! My father goes to get his cap and gown — he comes back empty-handed. There has been a fuck-up. Guess who doesn't get his robe? I am panic-struck, I start to cry. I am afraid my father will "stick out" from the rest. I am afraid he is crying inside. But my family!! They nod and go on with sitting down. They expected no more than what they got!! and it was this I wanted to tell the white women in the room; we never expect more than the racist, offhand treatment we get. This is a given to us! They wanted my father to be the fool, the outsider. I told this story once to a white woman friend of mine—"an unfortunate incident," she said. We don't believe it. Nothing is ever a mistake, or unfortunate to us. It is the way things are. As my father moved up the aisle in his suit, his dignity and strength was a present to me. As he walked on stage to accept his diploma, I thought my heart would encompass the whole room. I feel the same today. My aunts and uncles sat in their chairs nodding their heads, occasionally wiping an eye. Another place, another time, we would have beat the drum and danced an honor dance. The singers would have sung of his bravery in the face of the enemy.

This is what I wanted to tell the white women. In spite of you, we exist, we burn brightly. But the time has come when we have to make the flames together. There is no hope other than our movement, and it must be our movement, all of us, all kinds of us, all colors of us. Michelle, I felt that most of the women in that room understood. It was different. Gone was the indulgent, prostituting kind of guilt and defensiveness that usually comes from white women. Gone was the "listen to my story, I'll tell you how horrible my life is, how oppressed I am above all others" that has come from us colored women in response to white women's racism. That sticking in the knife, twisting it. I know I have enjoyed using my knife in the past. I can no longer enjoy such a useless endeavor. I thought of my Grandma and the many times I betrayed her in the name of normality, whiteness. My shame, my shame of my people. Our Indianness, our darkness, our ways. And my shame at my lightness, my eyes that shine out blue, my hair that is brown and thin. My shame at my quietness even now. I

write the words, the secrets, but can't force them from my throat except in very small groups of women, and sometimes not even to them. I know this is part of my culture. We Indians do not speak easily to people we don't know. The fear—don't trust, don't trust. But we have to, don't we?

I feel so much a part of you and your life. When I think of women like you, Cherrie, Mirtha, I know I am not alone in the isolation that white skin has put me in. I do feel crazy sometimes. I almost feel I am proving to myself as well as others, as if others sit in judgment and are watching for mistakes. I am the greatest judge of myself. I torture myself with shoulds and shouldn'ts. The calm times are becoming fewer and fewer. So much to do. Is time running out? Do you feel this? These are bad times we live in. Fascist times, scary times. It becomes more and more important to give ourselves the names. To call ourselves what we are and who we are.

We can grow from such encounters, such as the one last weekend. It means responsibility, faith, and true hearts. Last night, Denise read my Tarot again — and once again the Strength card looked out at me. And the Death card and the Magician. So many signs pointing to change, to ways of channeling power inward and outward simultaneously.

I feel that way as a lesbian/feminist who is a Third World woman. So many don'ts crowded into those descriptions. So much power concentrated in those descriptions. I long for changes and never knew I could be a means to a way to that change. To know this is an awesome feeling. To dare to take this thing on — Racism.

Dearest friend, this letter has been long, you must be tired. I look

forward to seeing you soon.

Sisterhood and love Beth



Self-Portrait (pencil, 1980) Diane Ayott (#19, 1982)

Making Soul, Creating Alchemy

A review of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Orig. published by Persephone Press, 1981 (available in 1991 from Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press)

This Bridge Called My Back stretches across the lives and histories of women of color — Afro-American, Asian American, Latina, and Native American; spans objectification and oppression, stereotype and otherness, racism and assimilation; crosses through reality, dream, myth, memory into vision, politics, revolution. So much is here in this book, for myself, for other readers, that it is difficult to begin — or at least, to know where. Much of the work in This Bridge departs from the past, in the lives of ancestors, mothers, grandmothers, foresisters —

I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth the wide-arched muzzle of brown women

(Cherrie Moraga, "For the Color of My Mother")

What a shame not to speak Blackfoot. It was my mother's first language —she'd talk it over the phone long distance — she'd speak it when she went home (the Blood reserve in Southern Alberta) she even spoke it in my dreams but I never learned. All that talking denied me.

(Anita Valerio, "It's in My Blood, My Face — My Mother's Voice, the Way I Sweat")

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grand-mother who went to look at apartments. ... She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanless neighborhoods

(Aurora Levins Morales, "'And Even Fidel Can't Change That!"')

"Speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth" — I think of my own mother; "my mother's first language": again I think of my mother — her patois, her speaking to family only in this tongue; people asking her when we went shopping in New York — "What is your accent? It's so musical!" And her anger at being asked, and her

shame also. Much later in my life, she told me she had a constant ringing in her ears from an early age, which makes it hard to hear herself speak. And she can also "pass" and has done so. But she has never lost her accent.

The silence of my colored mother has haunted me. At first I took it upon myself to learn the oppressor's language thoroughly. Then I (or perhaps this was simultaneous) took her silence into myself and did not speak or write in any real way. Now I realize my language is my own — whichever I choose to use, however I choose to use it —but that it comes from a past connected to my mother's past.

For me, Merle Woo's "Letter to Ma" made other connections.

When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a ten-yearold Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as a maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self contempt. For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into selfcontempt, passivity, and despair.

The realities of self-contempt are known to all of us who grew up "different" in this society. We have seen it as a force in the lives of those around us, have felt its power within ourselves. The task is to recognize this force, to outwit it, but always to be aware of its presence and the purpose it serves the dominators, the colonizers, the oppressors. The degree to which a woman has internalized the culture's contempt for her difference can vary according to the degree she is the other. But just as it is dangerous to hierarchize oppressions, so is it dangerous to assume that women of color, lesbians of color are in some way more in thrall to self-contempt than are white women,

white lesbians. I have known white lesbians in my life so mired in self-hatred that it is almost impossible for them to move. Merle Woo makes the important point that

Racism is an essential part of the status quo, powerful, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear that there are no exceptions [i.e., among white women]?

Because racism *is* connected to power, it may allow the white woman who is different (that is, possessed of a difference more than the difference of being female in a white-male dominated world) a connection to power that the woman of color will never have. And although the white woman may appear to be filled (awash, even) with professed guilt about her own racism, by her inaction she is accepting the power and privilege which come with racism. The woman of color is free of this connection to the dominant culture, unless of course she chooses to pass (and I mean passing not only in the sense of skin-color, but in accepting the dominant culture's condemnation of all difference, including her own). With each level of difference in identity, a woman is removed from the possibility of buying into the dominant culture; the task is to transform this removal into power.

This Bridge Called My Back connects women of color across racial, sexual, class, ethnic identifications. It connects women to each other and it connects ideas to each other. But the writings in this book are always aware of the divisions forged between women of color from varying backgrounds and heritages, and the writers respect the history of these

divisions while at the same time they move to mend them.

Mirtha Quintanales, "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance" (letter to Barbara Smith):

The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing. ... How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies": race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of class and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.

... I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the "white woman" — especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges - regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American "White Trash" and destitute.

These words of Mirtha Quintanales spoke in a particular way to me. I too am a white-looking Caribbean woman, immigrant to the United States. Her essay brought back many memories, many observations. One of the consequences of being colonized is that you are told, in both overt and subtle ways, that you must speak in the language of your oppressor, or else your speech is not real — it is dialect, patois, pidgin English. Just as you are trained in the language, so are you trained in his ideas: a package deal. In the school I attended in Jamaica, where I was taught by assimilated Jamaicans and white Englishwomen, one of the primary focuses of the teachers was to erase our accents, to correct our speech. Another was to teach us only the history, literature, religion of our "mother" country. I remember when I was twelve or eleven and chose for my foreign language Spanish rather than French; I explained to the headmistress that I thought it would be more useful in that part of the world to know Spanish — and she laughed. I have other memories of that school: one being that those of us with the lightest skin were singled out for the most intensive acculturation, and made to believe that this was some sort of honor, while the darker girls were encouraged in the high jump, broad jump, hundred-yard dash. This all now seems so simple, so incredibly blatant, but the effects were not so — they were (and are) complex and subtle and far-reaching.

The writers of This Bridge Called My Back are committed to a lifework which is radical. They have a patience informed with anger, a passion informed with consciousness — both necessary to see the revolution through. The writers also realize the complexity of any movement of liberation; that past, present, and future must all be

respected, integrated, and known:

Barbara Cameron, "Gee, You Don't Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation":

I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy

balance to maintain. Sometimes some of us are not so successful with it. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate.

When I was about 20, I dreamt of myself at the age of 25-26, standing at a place on my reservation, looking to the North, watching a glorious, many-colored horse galloping toward me from the sky. My eyes were riveted and attracted to the beauty and overwhelming strength of the horse. The horse's eyes were staring directly into mine, hypnotizing me and holding my attention. Slowly from the East, an eagle was gliding toward the horse. My attention began to be drawn toward the calm of the eagle but I still did not want to lose sight of the horse. Finally the two met with the eagle sailing into the horse causing it to disintegrate. The eagle flew gently on.

I take this prophetic dream as an analogy of my balance between the white (horse) and Indian (eagle) world. Now that I am 26, I find that I've gone as far into my exploration of the white world as I want. It doesn't mean that I'm going to run off to live in a tipi. It simply means that I'm not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those who are not bastards of the Pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.

This Bridge Called My Back is divided into six parts: Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism; Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh; And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You: Racism in the Women's Movement; Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia; Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer; and El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision. Each of these sections is preceded by a vivid portrayal of women of color by the artist Johnetta Tinker, whose artwork is also on the cover of the book. Tinker's illustrations are for me the best kind of women's art: for example, her portrait of a black woman at a bus stop writing in a notebook, which precedes Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer, brings to mind the probable reality that this woman is coming from work/or going to work, that the bus may come along and interrupt the flow of her words, that the bus may be late and she may have to stop writing and worry if she will be late for work / or late picking up her kids after school or daycare, etc. Each part is also prefaced by an introduction, the first four written by Cherrie Moraga, the last two by Gloria Anzaldúa. These essays, and the general introduction and preface, set out the purpose of This Bridge, design the context, combine the parts of the book into a whole:

Cherríe Moraga, introduction to Part 2:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience.

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

There is also in *This Bridge* a foreword by Toni Cade Bambara. Bambara points out in her essay a theme, *a fact*, carried through the writings in this book:

For though the initial motive of several siter/riters here may have been to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supercede their invitations to coalesce on their terms ... the process of examining that would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks ...

and a new connection: US
a new set of recognitions: US
a new site of accountability: US
a new source of power: US

In Sinister Wisdom #18, Joanna Russ talks about Harriet Tubman, and her portrayal by Cicely Tyson, as a woman motivated by herself, essentially for herself. A selfishness, a placing of the self first in her priorities, is something a woman of color is not supposed to have, or to do. I am talking here of a specific selfishness, one which demands a moral commitment to the self, not the superficial and comfortable self-involvement of the so-called me generation. I am talking about a selfishness hard-won against those forces always denying that self importance. The self-worth which will proceed from this selfishness will allow the woman in possession of it the power to connect within herself, to others.

Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers":

The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think of as "other" — the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were

different, set apart, exiled from what is considered "normal," white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive.

This Bridge Called My Back is essential to my existence: as I try to make soul, create alchemy. As I try to connect parts of myself within myself and stretch to meet other women of color. In St. Croix last March I met another Jamaican woman — a woman darker than myself. We were both of the same class. We had attended similar girls' schools — were taught by similar women. We compared our lives across anger. She has not returned to the island for some years, neither have I. She told me about a specific incident when she was twelve. The school was having an essay contest and she submitted her essay to the (English) headmistress; it was returned to her and she was told that a lighterskinned student had been chosen to represent their age group in the contest. Of course it was not said in those words. She took it upon herself to submit her essay surreptitiously. And she won. She said that this incident — this victory — was the only event in her school life in Jamaica which had aided her survival. And I could understand that. And I was also aware that my essay might have been the "official" entry. But I also remembered that when I returned to the United States I was left back a year because the school principal attested that Jamaican schools were substandard.

This Bridge Called My Back is written with power and beauty, courage and complexity. I can only hope that women make use of this book: as a tool; as a catalyst to create more work by women of color; as a source of knowledge and ideas; as a catalyst for white women committed to antiracism; as a source of energy. I want this book in the world.

Irena Klepfisz (#21, 1982)

from Bashert*

These words are dedicated to those who died

These words are dedicated to those who died because they had no love and felt alone in the world because they were afraid to be alone and tried to stick it out because they could not ask because they were shunned because they were sick and their bodies could not resist the disease because they played it safe because they had no connections because they had no faith because they felt they did not belong and wanted to die

These words are dedicated to those who died because they were loners and liked it because they acquired friends and drew others to them because they took risks because they were stubborn and refused to give up because they asked for too much

These words are dedicated to those who died because a card was lost and a number was skipped because a bed was denied because a place was filled and no other place was left

These words are dedicated to those who died because someone did not follow through because someone was overworked and forgot because someone left everything to God because someone was late because someone did not arrive at all because someone told them to wait and they just couldn't any longer

These words are dedicated to those who died because death is a punishment because death is a reward because death is the final rest because death is eternal rage

These words are dedicated to those who died

Bashert

These words are dedicated to those who survived

These words are dedicated to those who survived because their second grade teacher gave them books because they did not draw attention to themselves and got lost in the shuffle

because they knew someone who knew someone else who could help them and bumped into them on a corner on a Thursday afternoon because they played it safe because they were lucky

These words are dedicated to those who survived because they knew how to cut corners because they drew attention to themselves and always got picked because they took risks because they had no principles and were hard

These words are dedicated to those who survived because they refused to give up and defied statistics because they had faith and trusted in God because they expected the worst and were always prepared because they were angry because they could ask because they mooched off others and saved their strength because they endured humiliation because they turned the other cheek because they looked the other way

These words are dedicated to those who survived because life is a wilderness and they were savage because life is an awakening and they were alert because life is a flowering and they blossomed because life is a struggle and they struggled because life is a gift and they were free to accept it

These words are dedicated to those who survived

Bashert

^{*} ba-shért: inevitable, (pre)destined

This is the introductory section to "Bashert," the entire text of which can be found in Irena Klepfisz's *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue*—*Poems Selected and New* (1971-1990), available from The Eighth Mountain Press, 624 SE 29th, Portland, OR, 97214.

There Is Nothing Easy Here

A review of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Published in 1982 by Persephone Press (reissued by Beacon Press in 1989).

I cannot end without affirming as strongly as I can my deep feelings of identification and pride in being a Jew. It was Jews that first instilled in me the meaning of what oppression and its consequences are. It was Jews who first taught me about socialism, classism, racism, and about what in the fifties was called "injustice." It is from Jews that I adopted ideals that I still hold and principles that I still believe are true and must be fought for and put into practice. It was from Jews that I learned about the necessity for resistance. It was from Jews that I also learned that literature was not simply fancy words or clever metaphor, but instead it was deeply, intimately connected to life, to a life that I was part of. It is really almost impossible to compress this inheritance into a single paragraph. But I know its depth and vitality, and I know that I have absorbed it thoroughly into my consciousness.

from "Resisting and Surviving America" by Irena Klepfisz, in *Nice Jewish Girls*

I am not the Jewish Lesbian to write this review, I have been saying to myself for the last three weeks. I am not a good enough Jew; I am too much in despair over Begin's and Sharon's war in Lebanon; I am too angry at the American Jewish establishment; I never knew my father; I never went to Yeshivah; my mother broke all the rules and taught me to beware of orthodoxy of all kinds; my mother and brother spent years on parole for survival-connected crimes, not the usual Jewish family one sees in print. But yet I knew exactly what Irena meant. Jewishness had seeped into me in a hundred different ways, not from rituals or family celebrations, but from the streets of the Bronx where I was born, from the people I met there, like Sam, the delicatessen owner, who taught me history every time he stretched across the counter to hand me a package, the blurred blue numbers inching out of his shirtsleeve, from all the offices in the garment district where my mother worked as a bookkeeper from age fourteen, and mostly from Regina Nestle herself - gambler, mistress, embezzler, mother — ... who tried to teach me love, compassion, indignation and

a special combination of humility and chutzpah, along with the deepest wisdom of all — where and at whom I should direct these twin angels. The world for Regina was eternally divided between the bosses and the workers, the powerful and the powerless, and to forsake the little person was to her a major sin. So what kind of Jew am I? — not a good enough one; and perhaps this fear itself makes me more Jewish than I even know.

"Nothing is ever escaped" was the final message of a tired sick Black Baptist preacher to his doubting child,¹ and the same thought kept pounding at me as I read page after page of *Nice Jewish Girls*. This message is a hard legacy to leave for someone you love, the knowledge that all denials, all twistings and turnings will only bring you face to face with the history you thought was reserved for someone else. But the wonder and the challenge of it all is that this legacy is not a deterministic one.

...The twenty-six contributors to this anthology, all different and yet all part of Jewish and Lesbian history, ...turn and tell us what it is they live with, what historical memories, what contemporary contradictions, what joys of rediscovery, what terrors of exile. ... Evi and the others in this book have refused to be good victims. But they have also done more: for the most part, they have refused to oversimplify the conditions of our survival and resistance. On one side is the haven of Lesbian feminism rocky with anti-Semitism, while on the other is a homophobic homeland. ... There is nothing easy here.

Evelyn Torton Beck, born in Vienna in 1933, has put together an anthology that educates its readers in the deepest sense; personal narratives reflecting Jewish Lesbian diversity intersect with the history of nations, with the international laws and actions of institutionalized anti-Semitism, with multi-cultural heritages and with the idea and reality of Israel. Every woman I have met who is reading the book has said that she had learned something from it, and when I pushed for more information, the answers given were twofold: "I learned about the factual history of anti-Semitism and I learned about my own, how myths have taken hold without my really knowing it." One Gentile woman said she could not put the book down but had to read it through all at one sitting. She spoke as if this was her first travel guide to an exotic world. For the Jewish reader, there will be revelations of a different sort: "God, she thinks that too," or "No, no, that's

^{1.} James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 113.

not what our history means," or "I didn't know I hated myself so," or "yes, yes, I had forgotten." This anthology is a conversation most of us have never had, and it is way past time for it.

In the first section of the anthology, "If I Am Not for Myself, Who Will Be?", Gloria Z. Greenfield, Melanie Kaye(/Kantrowitz), and Irena Klepfisz recreate journeys they took to understand the full

implications of being Jewish.

In the next section, "Jewish Identity: A Coat of Many Colors," Josylyn C. Segal, Pauline Bart, Rachel Wahba, Adrienne Rich, Savina Teubal and Bernice Mennis show that being Jewish is not a monothematic cultural heritage. One can be an Afro-Jew, an Arabic Jew, a Gentile-Jewish Jew, an international Jew, a working-class Jew, a non-assimilated Lesbian Jew.²

The section...[of photographs by JEB] "That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Jewish Lesbian," reflects Evi's use of humor to defuse stereo-

types of both Jews and women.

In [the] "Family Secrets" [section the writers] use the narrative form both in essays and poems to tell the stories of their predicaments: the coming-out to sisters, to brothers, the challenge of raising sons in a Lesbian world, the struggle to be seen and heard when your life gives you a different set of rituals, the ordeal of going crazy because you love and desire the aunt you are supposed to follow into marriage and childbirth, the ordeal of being queer in a Jewish family that wants you to be safe. It is in these narratives that the personal costs of being both a Lesbian and a Jew, a queer and a Jew, become most clear. And not only the costs, but the dedication of trying to preserve connections while at the same time not betray either heritage. ... This is what history really means, events of huge proportions that live in our daily lives as terrors, demands, fears, separations, creating relationships that must bear the brunt of the past. The huge movement of forces comes down at times to whom we can love and whom we cannot.

I do not mean to slight any author in this collection by not mentioning her work specifically; every essay, every poem proved to me how much I needed to listen. ...

"Next year in Jerusalem," the next section of the book, addresses the joy and the dilemma that Israel poses for the Jewish Lesbian. I

^{2.} One note on language here. I cannot stand to hear a gentile use the word "Jew"; I have seldom heard one of them use it without hatred or puzzlement, and yet I want to use it myself. It fits the sound of other words I have come to love and fight for — fem, butch, Jew.

think it is appropriate here that the reader know my perspective. I am not a Zionist. I mistrust all religious nation-states. I despair over Israel's selling of guns to South Africa and to dictatorships all over the world. I do not believe that the way for the Jewish people to survive is through the eradication of other peoples. And I say all this knowing that America, France, Britain, Italy and Germany do the same thing on the world market, that I am not a Jew born in Europe, that I did not see my mother rounded up by the SS. But whatever my own feelings are, I learned from these reports from the Jewish frontline.

...I am Jewish and my memory is long. I remember the middle passage of slavery, the forced marches across this country's open plains, the plane flying heavy over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the smoke of burning Jewish bodies, the guns of Sharpeville and the dying cries of a Black man on a Brooklyn street corner. A long memory

is a promise of resistance.

...In "Cast a Critical Eye," Evi Beck, Judith Plaskow and Annette Daum use their insights as Jewish feminists to critique bodies of work that are either misogynist or anti-Semitic. ...

The anthology ends with a wonderful glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms used throughout the anthology. It immediately set me to making up my own list of remembered Yiddish words that my mother used and I had to face the discovery that the word *mensch* still means a hell of a lot to me.³ The editor also includes an extensive bibliography for further reading. My only addition here is that anyone doing work on Jewish Lesbians should contact the numerous Lesbian archives around the country: many unpublished papers, rituals, records of conferences, and letters are now available. I would also humbly like to add my own work to the list of writers who deal with the interconnection between Jewishness and Lesbianism.⁴

In any anthology, each of us will find voices that teach us, move us, make us lift our heads in recognition; each of us will also find passages that grate on our own vision of life. I needed the words of Martha Shelley, for example, in the poem "Affair with a Married Woman," in which she tries to explain the long history of gay oppression. "Yes, you know gay / but I need to teach you queer." Yes.

^{3.} *Mensch*: a person! acting with dignity both for self and others, but does not mean phony decorum. (My definition. Deborah Edel is a perfect example of what I mean.)

^{4.} See, e.g., Joan Nestle's story, "A Restricted Country," in SW #20 (Eds.) (Reprinted in A Restricted Country, Firebrand Press, 1987.)

Yes. Queer and Jew. For me equal. I was saddened by the several references to Lesbian S/M as being anti-Semitic. I do not agree. I find more potential fascism in the statements and actions of women who oppose this and other forms of sexual exploration than I do in those who actively discuss and explore issues of lust and power. I also believe that the fate of the Jewish people is as connected to the fate of the Lebanese people, of the Black Africans, of the Arabic people as it is to Israel. As a Jewish writer, I do not accept the suggestion Evi quotes in her introduction, that "unflattering descriptions of Jews or Jewish life in literature or other artistic creations" should be avoided. Oppression and historical insecurity as well as personal psychology do sad and complicated things to people; if anti-Semitism, like anti-Lesbianism, forces me into silence about what I have seen in life, then I have no inner life left. My people—both Jews and Lesbians—cannot run scared and still be able to know deeply who we are. This does not mean that anti-Semitism in any art form should not be scourged, but neither will I dwell in the desert of the fear of the gentile eye.

Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology made several important things very clear to me, as it did to every woman I know who has read it. These hard clear pieces of insight may be different for each of us, but for Jewish Lesbians one clear warning rings out: "if you had been there, you would not have been saved" (Elana Dykewomon). We will always wear the pink triangle in our psyches and each will decide what actions, what dreams keep the most faith with the courage that has gone before and erect the most powerful barricades against the forces of historical hatreds. There is nothing easy here, but oh how

essential it all is.

Heartshed

(for Lajuana)

You dream a heated chase. Your heart pumps time through you

into lakes of fire

and I can't sleep at night because you have found me.

You keep coming back, the one who knows the sound they call

"in the beginning."
It doesn't mean going backward.
Our bones are built of spirals.
The sun

circling.

Ravens hang the walls

calling memory.

You could call it a war; it has been before.

I have killed you many times in jealousy, beat you while you dreamed in the arms of another lover.

You shot me down in a war that was only our own,

my brother, my sister.

The names could be all that truly changes,

not love.

I walk into another room inside

your skin house.

I open your legs with my tongue. The war is not over but inside you

the night is hot

and my fingers walk their way up your spine.

[&]quot;Heartshed" was published in Joy Harjo's *In Mad Love and War* (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1990).

Your spirit rattles in your bones and yes let's dance this all again

another beginning.

Memory is triggered

by polished stones spit up from the center of the earth, by ashy rock that crumbles in your hand. Some are unborn children, others old ones who chose to learn patience, to know currents.

You dream a solid red cliff. The sun rises again over the eastern horizon. Saturn spins crazy in her rings.

The names change.

Ravens call.

Lean up against me full with the words that have kept you silent. Lean with the silence that imagines you.

I forgive you, forgive myself from the beginning this heartshed.

A Spoiled Identity

The main body of this speech was delivered at Sonoma State University, Sonoma County, California, at a lecture sponsored by Ruth Mahaney of the Women's Studies Department.

I would like to give credit to Judith Freespirit and Vivian Mayer (Aldebaran)

for their early courage and work on the subject of fat oppression.

My own work on the subject has also benefited from the work I've done with Cynthia Riggs and Hannah Banahn. The many supportive conversations we have had have become an integral part of my work. They will always have my gratitude for their spirit and courage in the face of so much opposing us all.

I wish that you could see me as I truly am. Instead, when you look at me what you see instead of the me that I am is a catalog of assumptions about fat women which manages to erase me from the situation. This is the experience of living with a spoiled identity.

Have I let myself go? Am I lazy and stupid? Do I sit at home all day eating chocolates and hating myself? Am I not smart enough to understand what good nutrition is? Am I a compulsive eater, out of control, not able to stop myself from gorging on food? All of these assumptions come directly from your head to surround the real person I am. And because I know these assumptions are there, or think that I know, I surround you with my own assumptions.

You will never be trustworthy! You are stupid for believing a cultural propaganda about fat women which is full of such obvious lies. You cannot allow yourself to be sexually attracted to fat women and so I will not risk my own vulnerability and open myself to you in this way. There is something cruel about you; you will always be something less than human to me, since to be human implies a consciousness of other people's pain — some understanding of the oppressions other people suffer from.

Thus you and I are both confronted by false personas as we look at each other. And all of this happens very quickly in the first few moments we see each other. It may be what we have to give each other

could be important: but we will never know this.

It is not possible to unspoil this identity. If our sense of self could come only from within, then those among us who are strong could possibly work on affirming our beauty and strength and this would be enough. But human beings are social animals and from infancy on

our identities are formed and grow from an interplay between the kernel of consciousness which is ourselves and the cacophony of contradictions which is the outer social world. So that by the time we are adults who we are is so layered by who the world says we are that we cannot escape from their judgments which now live inside us.

And these judgments are perilous to our integrity. It would be so much easier if I could direct my anger only at you - at your insensitivities and cruelties, which are many. But these cruelties now in adulthood have taken their place within me and when they speak to me it sounds like my own voice speaking, telling me how unworthy I am. It tells me not to risk when risk is the only thing I can do to survive. It tells me over and over again that I am fat and ugly, fat and ugly, fat and ugly — lazy, stupid, greedy, devouring: that I eat too much, take up too much space, that I do not deserve love.

At the end of this chain of hatred lies a monster in wait, ready to kill all that is self-loving in me. And the enemy within has so much material from the outside to batter me with! (Fat women in this culture are battered women.) And somewhere always in me is the kernel of pure self, which is loving to myself, which appreciates the strength and joy in my body, which tells me I do indeed deserve my presence on this earth, which reminds me this chain of hatred is forged with vicious lies, enemy lies, life-destroying ... And so there is a constant war within.

While the outside war rages. And it is a war in which I am almost alone against the world. Experiment. Pretend you are a fat woman and watch television for a day. Count how many messages there are which tell you that you are ugly and must change. Listen to how many remarks your friends make about "being too fat" and diets they are on and having to lose weight when they are already thinner than you will ever be. Look through magazines for a positive image of a fat woman. Then imagine what it is like to be a fat woman walking down the street, at the mercy of everyone who has been given permission from this society to hate and despise her. What would you do when they called you names? Are you surprised then that fat women often do stay at home, do not get the exercise they need, do sometimes eat for comfort? Are you surprised? How would you feel if you saw a bumper sticker which said "Save the whales — Harpoon fat chicks"?

Every day radical fat women are exposed to "radical" literature which pictures the fat capitalist devouring the thin "peasants." A very romantic image, but false. My mothers as many generations back as I have photographs of them have been fat, and we have all of us been poor. Not one banker among us hillbilly women. This myopic stereotyping is another example of the racist and classist bias which continues to dominate, whether it is the country clubs of the rich or the

coffeehouses of the lesbian community.

If I let myself accept what the world, what you, say about me, I at least am able to reduce the conflict in my life. If I can act stupid and lazy, eat compulsively, disbelieve there is any sexuality in me, then I can conform to the world's view and I can live a life that is not contradictory to your view of me. I can be the jolly fat woman that you expect. I will make a great friend to you, because I will have no expectations of any return. You can take and take from me and I will never show you my anger. Instead I will turn my anger against my self: in the darkest parts of the night my rage and your ignorance will join to destroy me.

A different strategy in this war is to face the rage that is in me: rage at you for making me something I'm not, rage at myself for being a fat woman and thus vulnerable to all the cruelties this society has to offer "the other." I can give you my anger over and over again — I can refuse to accept what you say and think about me. I can explore my own insides and learn the truth about myself. Although this is a more satisfying and enriching life than self-abnegation, it is a life of constant

conflict, anger, and dis-ease.

A third solution is to patiently devote my life to changing your attitudes. Giving lectures to classes of young women where perhaps all but one will walk away thinking "I will never let myself go like that" ... doing performances in which all the risks are taken by me, the performer, while the audience sits in the dark hoarding its secret prejudices ... writing essays and letters to editors of offending newspapers, trying to correct your assumptions ... and all of this could take a lifetime of work and only my own life will have been used up — the work will still be there, to be done by other strong, surviving fat women. Meanwhile I am a poet who needs to be doing my own work of poetry which I insist is important, and I am a mother who needs to be mothering my daughters and I am a lesbian who needs to be loving women and doing other political work. This "fat work" is exhausting to me, draining of some of my best energies, devouring parts of my life that are important to me. I can't escape from the resenting thought that I shouldn't have to be doing it: especially when you are a lesbian, I can't understand why you haven't made the crucial connections in regards to the oppression of fat women. My thought is that this is your work as much as it is mine. And I am needing for you to begin to do your share.

There is no doubt in my mind that this culture wants me, as a fat woman, dead. Whether this early death comes from the stress of

oppression, economic exile, the steady harassment from a crazed culture, the toll of learning from an early age a terminal self-hatred, or whether it comes through the physical toll that diets, operations, and other abusive treatments that fat women are expected and encouraged to undergo (often by their best friends), the results remain as deadly.

Every day as a fat woman the hard core of self-respect and love which I have had to make for myself, insist on for myself, against the grain of the culture, against what almost all other women were saying to me, comes under assault. I really am fine as a fat woman. I am often beautiful. Unless I develop a wasting disease (as my grandmother did) I will never be thin. It has taken me many years to accept this about myself. I will not postpone my life any longer, not for anyone's standard of beauty. There are so many of us, it profits none of us to have to battle our own communities for the right to exist.

All of my life I have had the opportunity to acquire the skills of the oppressed, as a working-class fat woman. Learning how to listen, keen intuition, paranoia, becoming conscious: I have not been able to live as so many have, sleepwalking through others' lives. I learned early what damage words could do, and what an intensely powerful tool exclusion is. I learned this from the outside, and this knowledge informs every act of my life. I ask you now to learn this, to listen to my

experience, and to change.

Women are bombarded with lies about ourselves from birth onward. It is not surprising that so many of us believe the lies. But for lesbians whose lives are already on the edge of fugitive, we cannot afford to encourage these lies in ourselves or in other women. Only the truth will save us. Not one of us can afford to feel good about ourselves because we are white, or thin, or middle-class, or young, or "able-bodied," or any of the other "safe" categories which are supposed to make women acceptable. Because when we build our acceptance of self on such flimsy accidents of time and place, we are building cages for our sisters and hammering shut the locks. And we have sealed our own doom in a patriarchal consciousness which is deadening.

Those of us with "spoiled identities" are gifted with the role of the outsider. So I come here today as the outsider to tell you this: listen, pay attention, your mirrors are lying to you, and you, acting as a mirror to myself and other fat women, are lying to us; your fear of the "other," your fear of me, the fat woman, the Medusa, is turning your own life and future possibilities to stone. And you are doing real

damage to lives without number.

Fight anti-fat propaganda. Fight it for your fat friends and for yourself. Learn the truth about women's lives. Learn how to recog-

nize dangerous propaganda, even when it comes from women you trust. Break through the lies in yourself now, for all of our sakes. And take this work with you, to make a world that will be possible for all of us to live in, as self-affirming and beautiful women.

Finally, see me as I truly am.

Useful Information

1. "Health" is one of the major bludgeons used against fat women. Isn't it really unhealthy to be fat? No, it is not more unhealthy to be fat. Many health problems that seem to be specific to fat people are actually caused by stress from oppression and constant dieting.

2. The medical approach to "obesity" becomes increasingly more technological and dangerous. Operations such as the Jejunoilial Shunt (which reduces the small intestine from twenty to two feet in order to cut nutrient absorption) endanger the lives of fat people, leaving them weakened, open to serious illness, and mutilated. Some women would rather accept this mutilation than live their life as a fat woman.

3. Dieting for fat women is an especially painful and ironic process. When the body receives the message that it is being given less food to nourish itself, it very efficiently organizes itself so that it requires less food. When the dieter attempts to return to a more normal eating pattern she discovers she now will eat less food to put on the same amount of weight. Each diet repeats this process, so that fat women who have dieted most of their lives can eat only very small amounts of food before criping weight.

amounts of food before gaining weight.

4. Many women identify themselves as being compulsive eaters. Some of these are fat women and some of them are non-fat women. Until we develop attitudes in this culture which accept eating as a natural need and enjoyment of life, rather than as an activity which women must go to great pains to deny themselves, many women will relate to food in a compulsive manner. Some fat women have discovered that what they once identified as compulsive eating went away when they stopped compulsive dieting. Some fat women identify themselves as compulsive eaters because they believe what everyone is telling them about themselves: in this anti-fat culture which links the fat person to food, any food the fat person eats is seen as being a sin against herself and society and is identified as compulsive eating. For anyone to assume they know what a woman's eating patterns are by her weight is both foolish and oppressive.

5. Amphetamines, which are the major drugs of choice in relation to losing weight, are extremely addictive, require painful withdrawal (sometimes leading to psychosis), and are destructive to the general

well-being of the person. Drugs sold over the counter without a prescription have recently been found to have serious side-effects, such as hallucinations.

6. It is probably true that many fat women do not get the exercise their bodies need. This is not because fat women as a group are any more sluggish and inactive by nature than their non-fat sisters, but rather the social risks which are required by fat women often do not seem worth the effort.

7. Studies have shown the success rates of diets over a five-year period to be between 2 to 3%. With those odds, would you risk your life and health?

8. Feminists agree that a woman should have control of her own body. Until fat women are able to accept and love their own bodies, no woman will really have the right to her own, because so much of the imprisonment of north american women has taken place in her mind.

9. My own surmise about fat and class is that there is a close correlation between fat and working-class and poor women. Certainly the standard of female beauty in north america is that of the white young anglo-saxon. Women of other racial groups and ethnic groups cannot achieve this "standard." In one study of New York women, by Stunkard, it was found that "obesity" was six times more common among women of the "lower social class" than of women of the upper social class. In this study, 30% of lower-class women were fat, 16% of middle-class women were fat, and 5% of upper-class women were fat. "Obesity" is also highly associated with ethnic origin.

10. There is a clear pattern of discrimination in the economic sphere against fat women. The Commission on Human Relations for the state of Maryland performed an extensive study of purported discrimination and has documented the results. Since there is evidence that being fat is related to one's racial or class origins, this is one

more way the system acts to grind down the poor.

[&]quot;A Spoiled Identity" was reprinted in *Shadow on a Tightrope*— Writings by Women on Fat Oppression, edited by Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser (Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, CA, 1983)

Class Acts: Shooting Script of a Poor White Experience

"What you feel has a lot to do with your economics."

- Rita Mae Brown

Ready camera one

I've been noticing myself sitting on the couch at one in the morning saying what I didn't say all day
I've been noticing myself saying what I didn't say

scene two

camera pans crowded suburban movie house many viewers are crying

I am watching a movie where a 16 year old kid gets 400 dollars a month for therapy and is living in a huge house where all the plates match and nobody mentions money not once in two hours
I am watching the ending and hearing a friend say that these are ordinary people

scene three impromptu on the street

well, one of the reasons that I have money is that I keep tabs on it CUT

you know they've made a study and if you took all the money in the world

and divided it equally

CUT

the same people who have it now would get it again CUT

STOCK FOOTAGE OF NEWSPAPERS ROLLING OFF PRESSES

Willamette Week lauds Labor Players for presenting working class characters who are literate and articulate

women who think like men blacks who act like whites mexicans with perfect english gays who aren't blatant

Camera pans kitchen washed in white light, coke cans on table with half empty loaf of wonderbread. A large, 21 inch, imitation color t.v. is on in the next room. Speaking from the screen, a sympathetic character seated on something soft:

Actually, I understand exactly what you mean. My grandfather, on my mother's side, he was working class. I get most of my values from him. Like saving money. I get so afraid if I don't have money in the bank.

scene six

I am at a party
40 dykes drinking apple juice
talking about comfrey
she puts her hand gently on my solar plexus
which according to her radiates a green aura
then she says
you are too articulate
to be working class

frame freeze fade to red

a bicentennial-like minute

the middle class is the buffer between the ruling class and the workers. From the middle class we get schizophrenia, literary criticism and television diction. Psychotherapy was invented by and for the middle class. No group is more homogenized than the middle class.

Workers build everything, produce everything, pick all the food and wash all the dishes. No group is more diversified than the working class.

The middle class talks for a living and feels reverent about the killing of oneself.

The working class learns not to talk back and are much more likely to kill one another. In fact, John Burlington, Burlington railroad, said I can hire half the working class to kill the other half.

Camera moves in slowly on panel discussion already underway

if you work hard and get an education you will succeed. If you do not succeed, you are not working hard enough, or you have squandered your money.

The Left speaks: if you are white and you work hard and get an education you will succeed. If you do not succeed, you are not working hard enough or you have squandered your money. You should not care if you succeed as long as you have a good stereo.

The Women's Movement speaks: The lives of poor women are too terrible to imagine. We must get Virginia Woolf in paperback.

The Voice from the otherside: Poor people have chosen their poor karma before they were born. It upsets their psychic to listen to them.

The middle class speaks: Everyone has problems. Of course, some people have more money than others, but that just means they have a different set of problems. I was miserable because I had braces at boarding school, I was lonely in Europe and I never made friends at Vassar.

VOICE OVER

Middle class people consistently deny that any other experience is more than superficially different from their own.

Closing scene:

I am at center stage saying what I didn't say

don't tell me that I overreact don't tell me how you're working class 'cause you have a waitress job when you also have a law degree don't explain to me how it's cheaper to buy than to rent and don't tell me you're broke when you're forced to live on your savings

and never assume that we think alike never assume we see the world alike never assume that we are alike

FREEZE FRAME UNDER ROLLING CREDITS

the reviews call it tacky. they call it overstatement. they go on for four paragraphs without once mentioning the content.

the middle class talks for a living

and denies that any experience is more than superficially different than its own.



Kitty (18" x 25"; charcoal — 1982) Karen Sjöholm (#24, 1983)

Her Name is Helen

Her name is Helen.
She came from Washington State twenty years ago through broken routes
of Hollywood, California,
Gallup, New Mexico,
Las Vegas, Nevada,
ended up in Detroit, Michigan where she lives in #413
in the gut of the city.
She worked in a factory for ten years, six months, making carburetors for Cadillacs.
She loved factory work.
She made good money, took vacations to New Orleans,
"A real party town."

She wears a cowboy hat with pretty feathers.
Can't wear cowboy boots because of the arthritis that twists her feet.
She wears beige vinyl wedgies. In the winter she pulls on heavy socks to protect her bent toes from the slush and rain.

Helen takes pictures of herself.

Everytime she passes those Polaroid booths, one picture for a dollar, she closes the curtain, and the camera flashes.

When she was laid off from the factory, she got a job in a bar, serving up shots and beers. Instead of tips, she gets presents from her customers. Little wooden statues of Indians in headdress. Naked pictures of squaws with braided hair. Feather roach clips in fuchsia and chartreuse. Everybody loves Helen. She's such a good guy. An honest-to-god Indian.

[&]quot;Helen" was published in Beth Brant's *Mohawk Trail* (Firebrand Books, 1985). This version is how it appears in *Mohawk Trail*.

Helen doesn't kiss.
She allows her body to be held when she's had enough vodkas and Lite beer.
She's had lots of girlfriends.
White women who wanted to take care of her, who liked Indians, who think she's a tragedy.

Helen takes pictures of herself.

She has a picture on a keychain, along with a baby's shoe and a feathered roach clip.

She wears her keys on a leather belt.

Helen sounds like a chime, moving behind the bar.

Her girlfriends took care of her.
Told her what to wear,
what to say,
how to act more like an Indian.
"You should be proud of your Indian heritage.
Wear more jewelry.
Go to the Indian Center."

Helen doesn't talk much.

Except when she's had enough vodkas and Lite beer.

Then she talks about home, about her mom, about the boarding schools, the foster homes, about wanting to see her people before she dies.

Helen says she's going to die when she's fifty.

She's forty-two now. Eight years to go.

Helen doesn't kiss. Doesn't talk much. Takes pictures of herself.

She touches women who are white. She is touched by their hands.

Helen can't imagine that she is beautiful.
That her skin is warm
like redwood and fire.
That her thick black hair moves like a current.
That her large body speaks in languages stolen from her.
That her mouth is wide and full and when she smiles people catch their breath.

"I'm a gay Indian girl. A dumb Indian. A ugly, fat squaw." This is what Helen says.

She wears a t-shirt with the legend *Detroit* splashed in glitter across her large breasts. Her breasts that white women have sucked and molded to fit their mouths.

Helen can't imagine that there are women who see her.
That there are women who want to taste her breath and salt.
Who want a speech to be created between their tongues.
Who want to go deep inside her touch places that are dark, wet, muscle and spirit.
Who want to swell, expand two bodies into a word of our own making.

Helen can't imagine that she is beautiful.

She doesn't kiss. Doesn't talk much.

Takes pictures of herself so she will know she is there.

Takes pictures of herself to prove she is alive.

Helen takes pictures of herself.

Who Is Your Mother? Red Roots of White Feminism

At Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, "Who is your mother?" is an important question. At Laguna, one of several of the ancient Keres gynarchical societies of the region, your mother's identity is the key to your ownidentity. Among the Keres, every individual has a place within the universe—which includes human and non-human—and that place is defined by clan membership. In turn, clan membership is dependent on matrilineal descent. Of course, your mother is not only the woman whose womb formed and released you — the term refers in every individual case to an entire generation of women whose psychic and consequently physical "shape" made the psychic existence of the following generation possible. But naming your own mother (or her equivalent) enables people to place you precisely within the universal web of your life, in each of its dimensions: cultural, spiritual, personal and historical.

Among the Keres, who are my mother's and grandmothers' people, 'context' and 'matrix' are equivalent terms, and both refer to approximately the same thing as knowing your derivation and place. Failure to know your mother, that is, your place and its attendant traditions, history and place in the scheme of things is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your placement on earth and in society. It is the same as being lost — isolate, abandoned, self-

estranged, and alienated from your own life.

And this notion of the importance of tradition in the life of every member of the community is not confined to Keres Indians; all American Indian nations place great value on traditionalism.

The Native American sense of the importance of continuity with one's cultural origins runs counter to contemporary American ideas: in many instances, the immigrants to America have been eager to cast off cultural ties, often seeing their antecedents as backward, restrictive, even shameful. Rejection of tradition constitutes one of the major features of American life — an attitude that reaches far back into American colonial history and which in present times is validated by virtually every cultural institution in the country, and feminist practice, at least as it shows up in the cultural artifacts the community values greatly, follows this cultural trend.

The American idea that the best and the brightest should willingly reject and repudiate their origins leads to an allied idea — that history, like everything in the past, is of little value and should be forgotten as

quickly as possible. This all too often causes us to reinvent the wheel continually. We find ourselves discovering our collective pasts over and over, having to re-take ground already covered by women in the preceding decades and centuries. The Native American view, which highly values maintenance of traditional customs, values and perspectives, might result in slower societal change and in quite a bit less social upheaval, but it has the advantage of providing a sturdy sense of identity and lowered levels of intrapsychic and interactive conflict.

Contemporary Indian communities value individual members who are deeply connected to the traditional ways of their people, even after centuries of concerted and brutal effort on the part of the American government and its allied institutions — the churches and the corporate business system — to break the connections between individuals and their tribal world. In fact, in the view of the traditionals, rejection of one's culture — one's traditions, language, people — is the result of colonial oppression, and is hardly to be applauded. They believe that the roots of oppression are to be found in the loss of tradition and memory, because that loss is always accompanied by a loss of a positive sense of self. In short, Indians think it is important to

remember, while Americans believe it is important to forget.

There is much to be said for the traditional Indians' view, if it is widened to mean that the sources of social, political and philosophical thought in the Americas should not only be recognized and honored by Native Americans, but should be implemented in American society. If judicious modeling of the traditions of the various native nations was practiced in the Americas, the place of women in society would become central, the distribution of goods and power would be egalitarian, the elderly would be respected, honored and protected as a primary social and cultural resource, the ideals of physical beauty would be considerably enlarged (including "fat," strong-featured women, grey-haired and wrinkled individuals and others who, in contemporary American culture are viewed as "ugly.") Additionally, the destruction of the biota, the life-sphere, and of the natural resources of the planet would be curtailed, and the spiritual nature of human and non-human life would become a primary ordering principle of human society. And if the traditional tribal systems that are emulated include those who have been pacifist since "time immemorial," war as a major ordering principle of human society would cease.

Re/membering Connections and Histories

The belief that rejection of tradition (as well as of history) is a useful response to life is reflected in America's amazing loss of memory concerning its origins in the matrix and context of Native

America. America does not seem to remember that it derived its wealth, its values, its food, much of its medicine and a large part of its "dream" from Native America. It is ignorant of the genesis of its culture in this Native American land, and that ignorance helps to perpetuate the long standing European and Middle Eastern monotheistic, hierarchical, patriarchal cultures' oppression of women, gays and lesbians, people of color, working class and unemployed people. Hardly anyone in America speculates that the constitutional system of government implaced here might be as much a product of American Indian ideas and practices as it is of colonial American and/or Anglo-European revolutionary fervor.

However Indians are officially and informally ignored as intellectual movers and shapers in the United States, Britain and Europe, they are peoples with ancient tenure on this soil. During the ages when the tribal societies existed in the Americas largely untouched by patriarchal oppression, they developed elaborate systems of thought that included sciences, philosophy and governmental systems based on a belief in the central importance of female energies, systems that highly valued autonomy of individuals, cooperation, human dignity, human freedom, and egalitarian distribution of status, goods and services. Respect for others, reverence for life, and as a by-product of this value, pacifism as a way of life, importance of kinship ties and customary ordering of social transactions, a sense of the sacredness and mystery of existence, balance and harmony in relationships both sacred and secular were all features of life among the tribal confederacies and nations. And in those that lived by the largest number of these principles, gynarchy was the norm rather than the exception. Those systems are as yet unmatched in any contemporary industrial, agrarian, or post-industrial society on earth.

Grandmother, The Old Woman Who Thinks Creation

The name by which the tribes and nations refer to the greatest kind of woman-power is "Grandmother" or "elder woman power." As the Keres remember (celebrate) our origins, "In the beginning, Thought Woman thought all that is into being." By this, they don't mean there is a beginning in the sense that first there's nothing and then there's something, but that at the source of our particular lifesystem a creation/power/being who is female in the kind of energies she possesses and expresses gave life to all that we know by the expedient of thinking it/us. They mean that she did and does that, and that without her thought nothing would exist then or now.

The Iroquois trace their origins to the descent of Sky Woman, who gave birth to a spirit daughter. When that daughter died giving birth to her twin sons, Ski Woman flung her body into the sky where it became the moon and hung her body on a tree near her lodge where

it became the sun. For so powerful was the spirit woman's being that even in "death" she continued to live. (And of course this myth expresses the Iroquoian idea that death is a change of state rather than an end, as well as their view of women as primary to life on earth.)

In ancient Meso-America, the Grandmother power was Gucumatz, the Feathered One, who thought and meditated and spoke with her cohorts. She was later to be called "Quetzal" — another word that designates the same bird and, by extension, the same ritual force. This being later became known as Quetzacoatl, the feathered or winged serpent among the Aztecs who were by all accounts a latter-day people descended of more ancient peoples. One of their major deities, Quetzacoatl, reflected the masculine shift that was beginning to take place in the western hemisphere about the time the Aztecs descended into the valley of Mexico and began building their masculine-oriented system.1 It appears that Quetzacoatl combines in his person the earliest female deities, Gucumatz and Cihuacoatl, or "Bird Woman" and "Serpent Woman" (who might both be better understood if called "Eldest Female Spirit Who Circles Above" and "Eldest Female Spirit Who Meanders Within"). In essence, the title of this best known Aztec deity, Quetzacoatl, reflects a female nature, for the highest Aztec deity, whose original identity (all but lost in the patriarchal ages since her coming) was Grandmother.

Changing Woman, as the Grandmother power is known among the Navajo, does just that, she changes. Ancient crone, seductive maiden, mature woman, mother, creator, grandmother, mistress of the sun, she wields the powers of Creative Thinking to the ends that best meet the needs of the universe of people, spirits and other creatures. According to an account recorded by Gladys A. Reichard, Changing Woman and her sister, Sand Altar Woman, were the sole inhabitants of this fourth or fifth world and made it safe for the human beings who eventually came here

from the previous world.2

Like Changing Woman, Hard Beings Woman has the ability to change from young woman to old crone. And, in the words of Hamilton A. Tyler, "... As every Hopi knows, the world was created by Huruing Wuhti, Hard Beings Woman." This creation-goddess is referred to as Spider Woman among the Hopi, and as creator she possesses many of the attributes of the Keres Thinking Woman, who is also informally known as Spider Woman. She is most often seen as the agent of human welfare and the benefactor of those who have good hearts and think no evil in their hearts. Often she is the champion of those who are weak, helpless, oppressed or suffering.

Speaking of goddesses with creative potency, the Zuni tell of Shi'wano'kia who "expectorated into the palm of her left hand and

slapped the saliva with the fingers of her right, and the spittle foamed like yucca suds, running over her hand and flowing everywhere; and thus she created A'wilelin Si'ta (Earth Mother)."4

On the Plains walks White Buffalo Woman. The director of wind powers, the significator of the quadrants, directions, seasons and solstices, she gave the sacred medicine pipe to the Lakota, and with it the rules for how they should be a people, and how they should live within their traditional tribal mind. She is the heart of the people, the psychically-charged center that gives their being as a people its structure, meaning and vitality. In that way she, like the Keresan Iyatiko (Corn Woman, the Mother of the katsina, the people and the animals and plants) or the Navajo Changing Woman, is the center of the people, the true source of their power to live and to prosper.

These are only a bare hint of the sorts of female gods that were recognized and honored by the tribes and nations, but even such a brief account indicates that femaleness was not devalued among them. Rather it was highly valued, both respected and feared, and social institutions of every sort reflected this attitude. Even modern sayings, such as the Cheyenne statement that a people is not conquered until the hearts of the women are on the ground, reflect their understanding that without the power of woman the people will not

live, but with it, they will endure, and they will prosper.

Nor did they confine this belief in the central importance of female energy to matters of worship. Among many of the tribes (perhaps as many as 70% of them in North America alone), this belief was reflected in all of their social institutions. The Iroquois Constitution or White Roots of Peace, also called the Great Law of the Iroquois, codified the Matrons' decision-making and economic power. For example, Articles 19, 44 and 45 provide:

The lineal descent of the people of the Five Fires [the Iroquois Nations] shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of their mothers. (Article 44)

The women heirs of the chieftanship titles of the League shall be called

Oiner or Otinner [Noble] for all time to come. (Article 45)

If a disobedient chief persists in his disobedience after three warnings [by his female relatives, by his male relatives and by one of his fellow council members, in that order], the matter shall go to the council of War Chiefs. The Chiefs shall then take away the title of the erring chief by order of the women in whom the title is vested. [My emphasis] When the chief is deposed, the women shall notify the chiefs of the League ... and the chiefs of the League shall sanction the act. The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the chiefs shall elect him. (Article 19) ⁵

Beliefs, attitudes and laws such as these resulted in systems that featured all that is best in the vision of American feminists and in human liberation movements around the world. Yet feminists too often believe that no one has ever experienced the kind of society that empowered women and made that empowerment the basis of its rules of civilization. The price the feminist community must pay because it is not aware of the recent if not contemporary presence of gynarchical societies on this continent is unnecessary confusion, division, and much lost time. Wouldn't it be good for feminists to know that there have been recent social models from which its dream descends and to which its adherents can look for models?

The Root of Oppression is Loss of Memory

An odd thing occurs in the minds of Americans when Indian civilization is mentioned: little or nothing. As I write this, I am keenly aware of how far removed my version of the roots of American feminism must seem to those of you steeped in either mainstream or radical versions of feminism's history. I am keenly aware of the lack of image or information Americans have about our continent's recent past. I am keenly (keening) aware of popular notions of Indian women as beasts of burden, squaws, traitors or, at best, vanished denizens of a long lost wilderness. How odd then must my contention seem: that the gynocratic tribes of the American continent provided the basis for all the dreams of liberation that characterize the modern world.

We as feminists must be aware of our history on this continent. We need to recognize that the same forces that devastated the gynarchies of Britain and the Continent also devastated the ancient African civilizations and we must know that those same materialistic, anti-spiritual forces are presently engaged in wiping out the same gynarchal values, along with the peoples who adhere to them, in Latin America. I am convinced that those wars have always been about the imposition of uncontested patriarchal civilization over the wholistic, pacifistic and spirit-based gynarchies they supplant, and that to this end the wars of imperial conquest have not been solely or even mostly waged over the land and its resources, but more, they have been fought within the bodies, minds and hearts of the people of the earth. This is, I think, the reason traditionals say we must remember our origins, our cultures, our histories and our mothers and grandmothers, for without that memory, which implies continuance rather than nostalgia, we are doomed to extinction.

The vision that impels feminists to action was the vision of the grandmothers' society, that society that was captured in the words of the 16th century explorer Peter Martyr nearly four hundred years ago.

It is the same vision repeated over and over by radical thinkers of Europe and America, from François Villon to John Locke, from William Shakespeare to Thomas Jefferson, and from them to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, from Benito Juarez to Martin Luther King and from Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Judy Grahn, from Harriet Tubman to Audre Lorde, from Emma Goldman to Bella Abzug, from Malinalli to Cherríe Moraga, and from Iyatiku to me. That vision as Martyr told it is of a country where there are "no soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no noblest kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits. All are equal and free," or so Friedrich Engels recounts Martyr's words.

Columbus wrote:

Nor have I been able to learn whether they [the inhabitants of the islands he visited on his first journey in the New World] held personal property, for it seemed to me that whatever one had, they all took share of... They are so ingenuous and free with all they have, that no one would believe it who has not seen it; of anything that they possess if it be asked of them, they never say no; on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it. ⁶

At least, that's how the Native Caribbean people acted when the whites first came among them; and American Indians are often the despair of social workers, bosses and missionaries even now because of their deeply ingrained tendency to spend all they have, mostly on others. In any case, as the historian William Brandon notes,

...the Indian seemed free, to European eyes, gloriously free, to the European soul shaped by centuries of toil and tyranny, and this impression operated profoundly on the process of history and the development of America. Something in the peculiar character of the Indian world gave an impression of classlessness, of propertylessness, and that in turn led to an impression, as H. H. Bancroft put it, of "humanity... unrestrained... in the exercise of liberty absolute." ⁷

A Feminist Heroine

Early in the Women's Suffrage Movement, Eva Emery Dye, an Oregon suffragist, went looking for a heroine to embody her vision of feminism. She wanted an historical figure whose life would symbolize the strengthened power of women. She found Sacagawea ("Sacajawea") buried in the journals of Lewis and Clark. The Shoshoni teenager had travelled with the expedition, carrying her infant son, and on a small number of occasions she acted as translator for the expedition.⁸

Dye declared that Sacagawea, whose name is thought to mean Bird Woman, had been the guide to the historic expedition, and through her work Sacagawea became enshrined in American memory as a moving force and friend of the whites, leading them in the settlement of western North America .9

But Native American roots of white feminism reach back beyond Sacagawea. The earliest white women on this continent were well acquainted with tribal women. They were neighbors to a number of tribes, and often shared food, information, child-care and health care. Of course little is made of these encounters in official histories of colonial America, the period from the Revolution to the Civil War, or on the ever-moving frontier. Nor, to my knowledge, has the significance of intermarriage between Indian and white, or between Indian and black been documented and the implications of these unions explored. By and large, the exploration of Indian-white relations has been focused on governmental and treaty relations, warfare, missionization and education. It has been almost entirely documented in terms of formal white Christian patriarchal impacts and assaults upon Native Americans, though they are not often characterized as assaults but as "civilizing the savages." Or, particularly in organs of popular culture and miseducation, the focus has been on the imaginary degradation of Indian women ("squaws"), their equally imaginary love of white government and white conquest ("princesses"), and the horrifyingly misleading, fanciful tales of bloodthirsty, backward primitives assaulting the innocent and virtuous efforts of white Christian settlers to find life, liberty and happiness in their chosen land.

But, regardless of official versions of relations between Indians and whites or other segments of American population groups, the fact remains that great numbers of apparently "white" or "black" Americans carry notable degrees of Indian blood. With that blood has come the culture of the Indian, informing the lifestyles, attitudes and values of their descendants. Somewhere along the line—and often quite recently—an Indian was raising the children of a family designated as "white" or "black." In view of this, it should be evident that one of the major enterprises of Indian women in America has been the transfer of Indian values and culture to as large and influential a segment of American immigrant populations as possible. Their success in this endeavor is amply demonstrated in the Indianized lifestyles that characterize American life. ¹⁰

An Indian Focused Version of American History

American colonial ideas of self-government came as much from the colonists' observations of tribal governments as from their Protestant or Greco-Roman heritage. Neither Greece nor Rome had a pluralistic democracy as that concept has been understood in the United States since the Jackson administration, but the tribes, particularly the gynarchal tribal confederacies, did.

It is true that the oligarchal form of government that colonial Americans established was originally based on Greco-Roman systems in a number of important ways, such as its propertied-white-male-only-need-apply-for-citizenship structure, but it was never a form that Americans as a whole were comfortable with. Politics and government in the United States during the Federalist period were also reflective of the English common law system. However, they reflected it as it had evolved under patriarchal feudalism and monarchy — hence the United States' retention of slavery and restriction of citizenship to propertied white males.

The Federalists did make one notable change in the feudal system it derived from. They rejected blooded aristocracy and monarchy. This idea came from the Protestant revolt to be sure, but it was at least reinforced by colonial America's proximity to American Indian confederacies and their concourse with those confederacies over the two hundred years of the colonial era. It was this proximity and concourse that enabled the revolutionary theorists to "dream up" a system in which all local polities would contribute to and be protected by a central governing body responsible for implementing policies that bore on the common interest of all. It should also be noted that the Reformation followed Columbus' contact with the Americas, and that his and Martyr's reports concerning Native Americans' free and easy egalitarianism were in circulation by the time it took hold.

The Iroquois federal system, like that of several in the vicinity of the American colonies, is remarkably similar to the organization of the federal system of the United States. It was composed of local, "state," and federal bodies composed of executive, legislative and judicial branches. The Council of Matrons was the executive, that is, it instituted and determined general policy. The village, tribal (several villages) and Confederate councils determined and implemented policies when they did not conflict with the broader Council's decisions or with theological precepts that ultimately determined policy at all levels. The judicial was composed of the men's councils and the matrons' council, who sat together to make determinations. Because the matrons were the ceremonial center of the system it can readily be seen how it was that they were the prime policy-makers.

Obviously, there are major differences between the contemporary governmental structure of the United States and that of the Iroquois. Two of those differences were and are crucial to the process of just government. The Iroquois system was spiritually based while that of the United States is secular, and the Iroquois had the female as executive. The female executive function was directly tied to the ritual nature of the Iroquois politic, for the executive was lodged in the hands of the Matrons of

particular clans that functioned across village, tribe and national lines. That office was hereditary, and only sons of eligible clans could serve, at the behest of the matrons of his clan, on the councils at each of the three levels. No one could impeach or disempower a Matron, though her violation of certain laws could result in her ineligibility for the Matrons' Council. For example, a woman who married and took her husband's name could not hold the title Matron.

American ideas of social justice came into sharp focus through the commentaries of Iroquois observers who traveled in France in the colonial period. These observers expressed horror at the great gap between the lifestyles of the wealthy and the poor, remarking to the French philosopher Montaigne, who would so heavily influence the radical communities of Europe, England and America, that "they had noticed that in Europe there seemed to be two moieties, consisting of the rich 'full gorged' with wealth, and the poor, starving 'and bare with need and povertie.' The Indian tourists not only marveled at the division, but marveled that the poor endured 'such an injustice, and that they took not the others by the throte, or set fire on their house ... "11 It must be noted that the urban poor did just that in the French Revolution. It was the writings of Montaigne and of those he influenced that provided the theoretical framework and the vision that propelled their struggle for liberty, justice and equality on the Continent, and later throughout the British empire.

The feminist idea of power as it ideally accrues to women stems from the same source. The central importance of the clan matrons in the formulation and determination of domestic and foreign policy, as well as in their primary role in the ritual and ceremonial life of their respective nations, was the single most important attribute of the Iroquois, as of the Cherokee and Muskogee who traditionally inhab-

ited the southern Atlantic region.

The latter peoples were removed to what is now Oklahoma during the Jackson administration, but prior to the American Revolution they had regular and frequent communication with and impact on both British, and later, American people, including the African peoples brought here as slaves. Again this most important aspect of American Indian political systems does not often find its way into official discussions of their history and culture though it has been recorded by white historians and ethnographers on occasion.

One such, Lewis Henry Morgan, wrote an account, published in 1877. ¹² This book was to heavily influence Marx and the development of world Communism, particularly the feminist—or women as powerful—aspects of the socialist revolution. Indeed, the very idea of socialism,

that is, of the egalitarian distribution of goods and power, the peaceful ordering of society, and the right of every member of society to participate in the work and benefits of that society are ideas that pervade American Indian political thought and action. And it is through various channels, the informal but deeply effective acculturation performed by Indian women who married into other cultures, the social and political theory of the confederacies fueling and then intertwining with European dreams of liberty and justice, and most recently the work of Morgan and the writings of Marx and Engels, that the age-old gynarchal systems of egalitarian government found their way into contemporary feminist theory.

When Eva Emery Dye discovered Sacagawea and honored her as the guiding spirit of American womanhood, she may have been wrong in bare historical fact, but she was quite accurate in terms of the deeper truth her discovery pointed to. The statues that have been erected depicting Sacagawea as a Matron in her prime signify an understanding in the American mind, however unconscious it might be, that the source of just government, of right ordering of social relationships, the dream of "liberty and justice for all" can only be gained by following the Indian matrons' guidance. For, as Dr. Anna Howard Shaw said of Sacagawea at the National American Woman's Suffrage Association in 1905:

Forerunner of civilization, great leader of men, patient and motherly woman, we bow our hearts to do you honor!... May we the daughters of an alien race... learn the lessons of calm endurance, of patient persistence and unfaltering courage exemplified in your life, in our efforts to lead men through the Pass of justice, which goes over the mountains of prejudice and conservatism to the broad land of the perfect freedom of a true republic; one in which men and women together shall in perfect equality solve the problems of a nation that knows no caste, no race, no sex in opportunity, in responsibility or in justice! May "the eternal womanly" ever lead us on!... 13

^{1.} At least, this seems to have been the case, though the apparent shift might be a result of Spanish Catholic destruction of all records and informal sources of information about a gynocratic system, for such would have given serious cause for alarm among European potentates, namely the officers of the Inquisition and the Pope himself. The Spaniards who were destroying documents all over Latin America during that period were largely interested in a peaceful conquest, and were unlikely to be willing to acknowledge gynocracy there if they were to find it but it is interesting (and perhaps not a meaningless coincidence), that the Aztec ritual or ceremonial calendar was based on a year of 2013-day months, and that that same 13 is, in Europe, the number of the wiccan covens and all allied cultures.

2. Gladys A. Reichard, Spider Woman, A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters (Glorieta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1971), 169-79; cf. 236.

3. Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman; University of Oklahoma, The Civilization of the American Indian Series, 1964), 37.

4. Tyler, p. 94, citing Stevenson "The Zuni Indians," BAE Twenty-Third Annual

Report, 1901-02, Washington, 1904, 23-24.

5. "The White Roots of Peace." Cited from version in *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States*, Dexter Fisher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980) 577. Cf. Thomas Sanders and William Peek, eds., *Literature of the American Indian* (New York: Glencoe Press, 1973), 208-239. Sanders and Peek refer to the document as "The Law of the Great Peace."

6. William Brandon, The Last Americans: The Indian in American Culture (New

York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), 6.

7. Brandon, 7-8. The entire chapter "American Indians and American History" is pertinent to the discussion (1-23).

8. Ella E. Clark and Margot Evans, SACAGAWEA of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (Berkeley and Los Angeles; UC Press), 93-98. Clark details the fascinating, infuriating and very funny scholarly escapade of how our suffragist foremothers created a feminist hero from the scant references to the teenaged Shoshoni wife

of the expedition's official translator, Pierre Charbonneau.

- 9. The implications of this maneuver did not go unnoticed by either whites or Indians, for the statues of the idealized Shoshoni woman, the Native American matron, suggest that American tenure on American land, indeed, the white right to be on this land is given them by her. While that implication is not overt, it certainly is suggested in the image of her the sculptor chose: tall, heavy woman, standing erect, nobly pointing the way westward with upraised hand. The impression is furthered by the habit of media and scholar alike of referring to her as "the guide." Largely because of the "hype" surrounding the circumstances of Sacagawea's participation in the famed Lewis and Clark expedition, Indian people have viewed her as a traitor to her people, likening her to Malinalli (La Malinche, who acted as interpreter for Cortez and bore him a son) and Pocahantas, that unhappy girl who married John Rolfe (not John Smith) and died in England after bearing him a son. Actually none of these women engaged in traitorous behavior. Sacagawea led a long life, was called Porivo (Chief Woman) by the Commanches among whom she lived for over twenty years, and in her old age engaged all her considerable skill at speaking and manipulating white bureaucracy to help in assuring her Shoshoni people decent reservation holdings.
- 10. A full discussion is impossible here, but an examination of American child rearing practices, societal attitudes toward women and exhibited by women (when compared to the same in old world cultures) as well as the foodstuffs, medicinal materials, counter-cultural and alternative cultural systems and the deeply Indian values these reflect should demonstrate the truth about informal acculturation and cross cultural connections in the American.

11 Brandon 6

12. Lewis Henry Morgan, Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery Through Barbarism to Civilization (New York, 1877).

13. In Clark, 96.

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"Who Is Your Mother?..." was reprinted in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* — *Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1986), slightly revised. This is the version that appeared in *SW* #25.



Self portrait — Butch-Femme Elise Dodeles (#42, 1990)

#35 We Say We Love Each Other

You say: The trouble is: we don't understand each other.

Your sounds have fascinated me from the first, the way you laugh in your throat like a saxophone. But last time the radio played reedy brass, low sexy, I started crying (last time, in the car alone, Duke Street, the aroma of tobacco curing, invisible smoke in my mouth, small jazz being played in a room in a distant city.)

Lately I understand this: I want your voice, mysterious music of your body, yet our words, gestures are from different languages.

If we are sitting on the couch, eating oranges, sweet acid, like lovemaking,

and the phone

rings in another room: you answer, your murmur, my stomach vibrates, a deep drum flutter at your sound:

you come back, I do not ask Who was it? to me, intrusion, a push into your room: to you, removal, uncaring of closeness:

then we are sitting on the couch, abrupt separate. The bitter orange rinds sit in a neat pile on the round dish before us.

I am sitting in a place made for me by women, generations, Scot, Irish, sitting on a little bit of land, holding on, survival on an island, isolation, a closed mouth in their own kitchen, self-containment.

You are sitting in a place made for you by women, generations, Jews in Spain, Holland, Russia, the Pale, Poland, Roumania, America, the pogroms, no bit of land safe, none to be owned as home, survival by asking, asking, knowing where every one was, enemy, family.

Later if we talk about this moment, we observe, abstract: even as I write, I make it distant: but we are sitting on the couch: separate, not abstract: history speaks like a voice through our bodies: how often we do not know that it is this we do not understand:

fascination with what we have not known: what we love: your hand gripping my chin, jaw, drawing me to you for a kiss: my interest in something in my hands, veins in my palm, in a yellow gingko leaf, my look up, the sudden kiss I give you:

what we fight bitterly: voices scraping against demanding, selfish.

Where is the future we spoke of, between us, stronger by difference?

We are sitting on the couch, trying to understand each other: signs, gestures, giving words, pointing to an object, what do you mean, translation, renaming, exasperation, repeating, frustration, anger:

lists, paper with words, paper with pictures, poems, photographs, pointing, asking what did you mean?

The other says she loves: how believe when her words, gestures are not the ones that speak love to you?

We sit on the couch. You rub my feet. I watch your mouth. We say again that we love each other.

for Joan, my lover 1/8/83

How Does You Love Me, Sweet Baby?

For Dori

A Black woman asks)
"How does you love me, Sweet Baby?"
I love you like this, HoneyMama:
I love the pores in your skin,
the freckles on your face,
and the hairs in your nose.

I love you more than every toe nail you ever clipped off yo' feet, more than every cornflake you ever poured in a bowl, more than every seed you ever spat from a watermelon rind.

I love you more than Maybelline loves eyes, more than Avon loves doorbells, and more than Madame Bergamont loves grease. That's how I love you, HoneyMama.

Then, she asks:

"And how does you want me, Sweet Baby?"
I answer: I want you like I want my coffee, HoneyMama, hot and black,
I want you like I eat my greens — with my fingers and no fork, like children want suckers, and like babies want tiddie.

Then she asks,
"And how you gon' keep me, Sweet Baby?"
I'm going to keep you close like a secret
precious like your Mama's picture
and watered like a potted plant.
I'm going to keep you in — like heat in the wintertime
on the bed like your grandmama's quilt
and free like a naked sleeper.

"But how long will it last, SweetHoney?"
It'll last as long as we call home a family
as long as music is played there
and as long as joy is in our hearts, eyes and touches.
It'll last, and this is the truth, MamaBaby,
Every moment that it does.

Menu for an Unassuageable Hunger

The Appetizer: My mother makes a bowl of porridge.

With her own hands, my mother prepared a bowl of porridge for my breakfast. Her hands shook: she had just flung a small plate to the floor.

"I wish I'd thrown it," she said quickly to my father, an instant before it struck. He was washing while she dried. She had, of course — thrown it, that is, so that splinters shattered all across the worn, beige linoleum—but she'd had to call it an accident. He could become

violent in a minute, and then everything would fly apart.

When last night's supper dishes were all clean and dry and stacked away, and the broken sideplate swept up and dumped in the dustbin whose lid flipped up when you stepped on the pedal, she got the square green box of Tiger Oats out of the cupboard and began to make my porridge. It was winter, and raining out of sheer resignation. The sky had been a dull, opaque grey for days. Warm porridge is so kind on comfortless mornings, especially when you put raisins in the pot so they get soft and plump, and then sprinkle loads of sugar over it all in a mottled porcelain bowl.

My mother's hands still trembled as she stirred her tea. I spooned my porridge. I was empty but not hungry, my stomach a fist. The sugar melted into clear threads as I stirred and stirred. She was pale as china. Her eyes were dead and pulpy. I felt the fear sprout in the pit

of my belly and shoot up into my lungs.

"Thank you, Mummy," I said. "Thank you for my porridge." She

looked at me as though she might never see me again.

"Don't worry," she said. "Grownups have fights, and then it's

over." Her voice grated over the lie.

"I'm not worried," I lied back. "I love you, Mummy." Her grateful, loving glance drenched me with misery. She stopped stirring and gulped down all her tea before lowering the cup and smiling at me. By the circles around her eyes, she might have been starving. I scraped smudges of cold paste together around the edge of my bowl and swallowed hard. I was late for school again.

I rose from the table and went to hug her. The intensity of her grasp boiled through my small body until I couldn't tell my own frightened breathing from hers. Finally, I fell free and ran to my father's car, the porridge a lump of glue in my stomach. Rode all the

way to school beside his familiar rage. He scribbled his customary note on the back of an envelope: Please excuse Jennifer for being late. When I got home, she was gone.

The Entree: There is always plenty to eat.

I require special feeding. From the start, no one could feed me. Not even my mother, who was supposed to know, though nobody told her how. No one had fed her, either. Dark, sweet warmth should have filled me at her breast until in perfect safety I overflowed, oblivious, half-dreaming; but that soft body expelled me, then had nothing more to give. I drew and drew on it and was not nourished.

Imagine a kitchen. In the center of the kitchen, which is not large, a table, the kind with tubular legs and a red formica top. Possibly there is a tablecloth. At the head of the table sits the father. His viciously unhappy wife is at his right, or else she is serving from a pot on the stove, behind him. On his left sit two small girls, sister and sly stepsister, each eyeing different loopholes and grasping at different conclusions.

The eldest, also a girl, faces him from the foot of the table. Behind her is the porcelain sink and beyond that, the back door. She has a slight click in her jaw, and it can be heard as she chews, a rhythmic counterpoint to the silence that follows the rasp of the woman's chair, everyone having been served.

I love food. I love caressing the indulgences crowded into my cheerful refrigerator. I love combining and juxtaposing, proposing outrageous contrasts of texture and flavor, rerunning old favorites, constructing impossible extravagances. I love playing over the cans of anchovies and peas, chili and olives in my kitchen cupboard. Breathing between the boxes of tabouleh and macaroni cheese. Handling the fat jars of rice and artichoke hearts and honey. I love spreading peanut butter and marmalade on matzoh and crackers and dark rye bread. I love having food here in my house, food that I love, love in my house.

When the oldest girl comes home from school, she goes first to the kitchen. Inside the refrigerator, she knows, are milk and cheese and probably other excellent tidbits wrapped in waxed paper or tinfoil or sealed in Tupperware containers. She seldom pays attention to these things, however, as they are not for her. These things are for guests, or for the children, who need them for their bones and their teeth.

But the breadbox is easy and free. Usually, there is a good white loaf there, and from this she cuts two slices and butters them. She makes a pot of tea and drinks it black, with plenty of sugar, as she eats her bread and butter. Sometimes a cup of tea is finished while the last slice of bread is not. Then she pours another cup and stirs in more sugar. At other times, the bread is all gone while the pot is half full. Then, she cuts and butters another slice. Often she is alone in the kitchen with her tea and bread for what seems like hours, after she gets home from school.

Warmth fill my belly. Sweet swelling heavy warmth like cake rising in the pan as it leavens, spongy and moist and thick, steaming and sighing in its dark oven. Like oatmeal must feel at its own heart, when it bubbles rich in the pot and the honey streams off the spoon in rivulets and is drawn into that hot and secret love. Warmth fill me, quiet and essential and safe and enveloping and hold me, hold me. For Christ's sake, hold me.

There is a problem. The father and his wife are not in agreement. She serves food first, as always, onto his plate. Her movements are mean and sharp. She clenches the spoon as she might an enemy's throat. The two small girls are next. The sister is weeping with terror. The stepsister takes her food smirking, but uneasy. Then the oldest girl. She thanks the woman several times, makes certain her plate is squarely in front of her, attends to her manners. She chews cautiously and swallows whole, so as not to annoy with her clicking jaw. The woman serves herself and sits, but does not eat. The silence stretches longer and thinner and longer and then.

The woman stands suddenly and snatches her plate to throw it with great force against the wall. Yellow curry oozes down the sweating paint, lumps of meat and carrot and dull green peas sliding down to congeal among the shards. The impact shakes loose a cupboard door, which swings slowly open and hangs over the mess.

The silence has not been broken.

After a while, the oldest girl stands and goes to clean up the debris. As she rises with a handful of splinters and gravy, she strikes her head on the open cupboard door. She cries quietly as she works; not from the pain, but because things come out of nowhere and hit you, even when you're taking the best possible care.

Nothing else matters. It is imperative that I eat, immediately is not soon enough. I should already have eaten many times what I have eaten. What I eat should have heft, should carry density and real weight. What I each should force great channels open in my body, should fill all hollow spaces and push against the straining walls; it should suck to every part and make solid what

is insubstantial. What I eat should crowd most especially into my belly, should cram and bloat this vast, extraordinary vault, this innocent and undefended womb where my power sleeps like a stupid, drunken giant.

Silence. Their forks click on their plates. Suburban trains can be heard rumbling by from time to time as they carry boisterous girls and boys home to happy families and hearty suppers. Silence, except that no matter how carefully she chews, her jaw clicks. Some whimsical bone plays light percussion against the void surrounding, each time she bites down on her potato or her mutton. She chews to the left, to the right, she chews lightly, she chomps down hard, it's no use. Her jaw clicks as she eats.

The father is bitter about his destiny, and irritable. He holds his knife poised above its chop and looks straight at her over the kitchen table. His wife, absorbed in her own fury, continues to eat with the air of one irrevocably disgusted by all she encounters. The sister stops breathing and waits wide-eyed, paralyzed. The other child's face flushes with anticipation and glee. A picture of respectful receptiveness, the older girl swallows an unchewed mouthful and sits very still while the mass tears a path through her chost. At last, the fether speaks

a path through her chest. At last, the father speaks.

"Do you," he says, "have to make so much bloody noise when you eat?"

I make great noise with my pleasures. I howl as orgasms rage through my organs. I gasp in galleries and scream at concerts. Having been touched by the promise of tenderness, I drive away shrieking raw delight. I moan and sigh and make frequent appreciative remarks when food, especially, pleases me. I crack bones with my teeth to suck out the tender marrow, then chew the gristle so it crunches and snaps between my jaws long after everyone else has finished. With beans and noodles I like to make soft, wet sounds, to blend the grainy starches with my tongue. I conduct eloquent conversations while I eat, parting warm sodden wads to ease the words thickly through. I demand that food salute my tongue, gladly, with noisy greetings; that it make merry in my mouth; that it coax my shameless body to unfettered response, in a chaos of loud and joyful celebration.

A Sherbert.

Dear heart, how time has run away with us. Has it been just a year since we called it love, wanting something more? Vividly I remember the oysters caressing our throats, the wicked coffee, that mousse. You poured into my eyes and fed me chunks of lobster, the butter dripping

clear as my heart from your reckless thumb. "Take it with your mouth

full," you crooned. I never dreamed that meal could end.

Only a year, and now you give my birthday cake to the waitress. You shame me with complaints at my only restaurant. I'm wasting away from the hunger, but you aren't paying attention. You should be coaxing me, the spoon shimmering with liquid understanding: you should lick the overflow from my chin. But you eat alone instead, growing pale and querulous. This cold drizzle of power has seeped through these pores too long. My stomach hardens against it.

The Dessert: The revenge.

Oh, you cheap, you joyless lovers. You mean and restless women, who count out your love as though it can never be replenished; who skim the cream from your pleasure in case it should be spent, who breathe sour sorrow over all our desires. Oh, you misers, disgust is your discipline, you cringe from your own moldy leftovers. Fear cools to skin over your eyes, the chill of certain hunger tightens your jaws. Your mouths are useless for loving.

Wait, stay quiet. I have a bathtub full of butter right here. I have a closet crammed with cheesecake. Hold still, I'm stroking it through your hair. I'm packing your throats, I'm parting your buttocks, lie still.

I'm stuffing you like turkeys. Are you beginning to feel?

Hang on, now, there's more — I'm two women, thirteen, nine million coming at you, pelting you with chicken fat and unspeakable brews, delicious! I have a dump-truck, I'm heaping paté on your

heads, piling figs around your thighs.

Are you drowning? Good. Are you soggy and breathless with forbidden pleasure, does the richness overwhelm? Are you too bloated to tense yourselves against the glut? Good, good. I'll leave you then, pale dough in secret ovens, leave you to marinate and swell, to moan and simmer until you're just as tender as truffles. I'll be patient as you've never known me, I'll wait and wait till you're swooning in your creamy crusts, till you're mellow and yielding as the ripest cheese.

And then, my loves. I'll wade back through the stew to find you. I'll come for you where you sputter like sweet, fat cherries in the breast of a pudding. I'll singe my fingers to pick you out, my darlings, and I'll eat you, one by one. Burning my tongue. Smacking my lips as I go.

the real fat womon poems

I went to get a glass of water and was overtaken by grief grief at the kitchen sink womyn's grief for the life that vanishes hot water and grease for the hundred fears about what we eat and what size we are and whether standing, with soap lining the creases of our hands, hurts our backs or feet and if that's our fault.

It was dark in your kitchen.
You had been complaining
about your body,
bitter attacks on the new swells
that define your belly and hips.
And I said
so why don't you hack yourself to pieces?

And you said I wish I could.

When I got to the sink I couldn't turn the faucet on. The white porcelain dull under the light from the yard couldn't speak my back to you my back against the world grief at the kitchen sink a womon's drama the fat womyn's fight the silence we were born into catching us.

Will the real fat womon please stand up? We want to take a good look at you. Don't you trust us to look? What is it you think will come to focus, where do you think we'll begin? With your double chin, the roundness of your cheeks, the width of your upper arms—there does the flesh ripple, or are they full? Do they bulge, are they smooth? Where are your stretch marks? Did you gain weight fast or slow? Do you eat a lot at once or do you eat a little all day long? We all know a fat womon is what she eats. Can we watch you eating? You must be hiding something in your flesh, is it rage or sex? C'mon, we're your friends, we just care about you and we want to see where the fabric hugs the expanse of your stomach the rolls at your waist the fat that collects in pockets on your upper back. What kind of stomach do you have? High and round, or does it slip, slowly, towards your knees, do your nipples scratch the top of your pants? Do your pants fit? When your clothes are too tight do you feel like you're exploding out of them into the street and all you want to do is get out of sight?

III

Asshole, asshole,
I can answer for myself,
you don't know anything
You ask these questions
as if I were an interesting specimen
as if I wasn't you
Who did this to us?
And what makes you think
I would ever trust you?

IV

There is being fat, and there is eating. There is eating, and then there's the food. There is fat and there is aging There is aging and there is disability.

None of these things are the same things though they are used, often, interchangeably. Who did that? Who did that to us?

And with each of these words is the word: ugly.
Even with the word eating, the word ugly is paired by womyn in North America in the late 20th century.

V

Now there are politics for these things.
Unpopular politics, but there are some.

We live in a country that consumes, that needs consumption to continue consuming, and what gets consumed are the resources and the lives of dark skinned and poor people, the lives of womyn in sweatshops, of womyn carrying rocks on their heads in India to build American hotels. We saw a lot of newsreels in the '60s. Some of us stopped watching the news but the news doesn't change. Even if I choose carefully, don't want my "major purchases" to contribute to the evil done to people in Soweto, some womon in a factory compromised her eyes or her lungs her back or her labor for my computer for your vcr for the stereo, hell, for the music.

When did we let ownership purchase our analysis? Consider it: they don't have to buy us out we pay them.

It would be nice to have a target an easy simple target who could take some of this unease about our consumerism.

The fat womon, she'd do.
She moves slow, and she's wide.
It's her who starves children
across the globe
it is her hideous appetite
that makes us ashamed to be Americans.
All those fat cats living off the fat of the land
we don't have access to,
the fat cats who are

lean men in limousines.
We call them fat
because we have been taught
that fat means eating
means consuming
means taking the rights to what is not yours
and these things which are not the same things
become the fat womon's fault
it's a shame she's so out of control.
We hope she stays indoors.

VI

Oh, those politics I thought you were going to talk about the other stuff.

What other stuff?

You know, the stuff about the diet industry and the stuff about womyn hating ourselves wanting to hack off parts of our bodies sew our mouths shut pull out our intestines suck the fat with syringes wrap ourselves in constricting plastics take drugs that make our hearts race race away from us.

VII

In the zoo they have signs polar bears may weigh up to half a ton. A girl is reading the sign out loud. "Wow!" she says.

We are standing there admiring the polar bear who is doing back flips in her pool.

If they stuck a sign on the human race and said members of this species occasionally reach a weight of 1,000 pounds but weights in the range of 1-400 are most common would that help?

VIII

Saturday afternoon, doing errands,
I catch pieces of a radio speech
on power relations.
A womon is talking about
the pleasures of mutuality,
not power over, but power with.
How we might better express power to our benefit
by touching and being touched
hugging and being hugged
feeding and being fed.

On the radio she said it is a good and mutual pleasure to feed and be fed.

I catch my breath.
Is it still possible to transmute the power relations around eating so that there is mutual pleasure left?

IX

I am a fat womon
I can speak for myself
but what would I say to you?
Why do I think I need
to tell you how much
sugar, how much meat
I eat in a day, in a year?
Why do I think I need
to tell you how often I go swimming
or how, if my feet hurt,
it's a problem anyone can have,
fat or thin, why
do I want to tell you
the statistics about dieting
the fact that it's thin people

who suffer most from heart disease. And why do I think no matter what I tell you you will you think I'm lying.

Unless I tell you I spend all my time eating chocolate cake in front of the tv. That I eat three chocolate cakes a day and two six packs of coke in between my six meals and I get up in the middle of the night to eat pancakes.

You'd believe that, wouldn't you? And I remember when they called all fat womyn fools.

X.

I am a lucky fat womon. If I lie in bed and have a fantasy about eating six chocolate cakes of being fed six chocolate cakes by six fat womyn who are admiring my six new rolls of flesh I can get pleasure from my fantasy and know that it's resistance to this ridiculous persistence of shame thrown at me. I can get up and go about my business without too much pain, struggle with how I eat like every womon I know does wheat give you arthritis, do the chemicals they inject into apples give us cancer in our apple juice? How do I balance my years of anger and deprivation with my desire to eat what's "good for me"? How do I know, when they say it's good, it isn't this year's medical fashion hoax, another way to hate fat womyn?

I like to eat.
I like to feed other womyn
and be fed
when I can bear that intimacy.
I like intimacy when I can bear it —
when I can trust you.
I have appetites in my mind
that I cannot express in my body
at least not yet,
I work on it.

But I hear what's been said when I look in the mirror and I'll be honest I have the words fat and ugly paired in me.
The pairing of the words makes me turn away faster than what I actually see.

I touch myself and I feel good beneath my hands Sometimes I have lovers sometimes they enjoy my body and enjoy me enjoying theirs.
When I don't have lovers I feel good beneath my hands.

This makes me a very lucky fat womon. If I believe the evidence, the testimony of other fat womyn, it makes me an extraordinary fat womon and that's a tragedy.

XI

A very thin womon, disabled, tells me how she spent a day crying because she was afraid to get on cross country skis afraid of her own fragility, afraid to be physical in the world.

She tells me because I would understand and I do.

I know womyn who are fat who vomit.
I know womyn who are thin who vomit.
Womyn close to me hate their bodies,
womyn who know everything in this poem already hate their bodies.

Womyn hate our bodies.

We have been working for justice, out of love, in the different ways we understand it, for years, in a hundred movements.

We have been going to twenty therapies bodyworkers and twelve-step groups—

And remember we're lesbians we lust for one another in our good moments we tickle and rub

and we hate our bodies
What keeps you from understanding
what you do to me?
What did they pay you to do this to yourself?

Who does this to us?

Where is our courage?

And what happened to our resistance to our simple stubbornness not to let our enemy win not to let our enemy win inside us.

The Disappeared

1.

The leans back in her chair and laughs, eyes auburn longing, after dinner cognac auburn fire in her glass. Tonight she smokes a cigarette slow but tomorrow she's disappeared. We look for her, trudge neighbor to neighbor photo cupped in palm. We stop gathering at overdressed downtown tables It's not that we never lean back and laugh again, but it always reminds us.

2.

She knits her thin body into poems on the steps of the missile factory, hair red flocks of birds in the stiff slap of dawn. She calls it street theater. They call it trespass. Clerk of the court pulls papers from files, thin yellow, pink and blue, then whispers to a uniform with guns. He whisks her through doors

behind the judge's throne like dirt on the end of a broom and doors click closed.

3.

She weeds a garden long as half a central Illinois block when the bomb lands scraping side of its nose in her sweet peas and she scatters, her spring's work a blister. Her daughter watches from the porch thin arms as if held up by strings, small sobs rising from her stomach like yelps of a plastic squeeze toy.

4.

I fear my lovers
will leave me
and they might,
but what of shadows
of lovers on brick,
arms held above
ears, then no shadows,
no letters, no late night
calls when rates are
cheap, nothing.

5.

I want to hold your face in my hands, your lips to my throat. The city outside my window smokes white with snow and cold car exhaust. I watch you through Christmas lights. It's like hands ripping open my breasts, my lungs torn out. I watch you shot.

6

El Playon in El Salvador. This is where bodies of somebody's lovers are piled like so many skinned seals. Shavings from my pay buy men in El Salvador who tear apart bodies like holiday birds for money for a uniformed post for some hybrid of pleasure. I am a breathing piece of this jewelled octopus my country. None of my lovers are missing yet. I can drag in a tentacle with them now, or I can wait.

Just That Would Be Enough

My mother who was washing the dinner plates when I told her about my rape and who was rinsing them when I finished said Iris you just don't know how to let a thing go.

She likes my sister, who slits her yellow silk dress open at the throat like some tulip and assumes she can always choose who will pick her.

How neatly she pauses between each morsel of meat instead of eating eating eating as though each bite could pad the coat I could wrap myself in, an armor of indifference.

It was a friend who told me sex sometimes lines the undersides of your eyelids with a violet light and just once after the rape she asked kind of nervous, do I ever be afraid of sex now and I confessed Lucy I haven't had sex, what happened to me was war. War that shattered all the windows of this house, my body and fear that drops like heavy plaster on all my ordinary moments.

Like anyone else I used to have nights when I could wrap dark around me like a soft thick fur and sleep, just sleep would curl its smoky feline tail along my back and lull me.

Like anyone else I used to have days where waking I sat with a boiled brown egg in its cup before me and just stared, stared at that bald little world so lopsided with genesis and its face so naked of roads or fences and joy,

Joy would break its golden yolk inside me and I now think just that would be enough, just that.

Non-violence

I'm the girl who believes I believe well
I believe in violence in every cell
every sense of body in bones
and blood and back and brain
I'm the girl who put the paper target
complete with 6 neat .38 caliber holes
through the small red heart
of the line drawn picture of a man
on my door I taped that target on my front door

on my door I taped that target on my front door one year It made me smile when I came home late nights alone afraid

I know about violence

and I'm the girl who knows the name of every tree on the mountain

and the place where lightning took out the top of the old pine the place where the August wind storm broke apart an oak

I know about violence

I'm the girl who knows the feel of a nickel blue blade cold against the skin of rib

the girl who cries when she stands on the beach and the clouds roll and the sky turns pink

I'm the girl who knows the feel of scars healing on a 12 year old back

and the feel of hoping only that they heal before the next set of leather belt strikes

I'm the girl who lived one summer grown up wild on berries and roots wild plum & apple

green leaves and fox grapes and asparagus

I'm the crazy girls who can run in the woods

I'm the girl who survives

I'm the girl who knows the colour of purple green bruises from hand and fist on arm and jaw the feel of tracing those old lines about love and learning and for your own good
I'm the girl who can build things out of wood
I'm the girl who has looked into the bloody face
of a boy dying from a shotgun blast hunting accident
and the face of girl a friend hit killed left
by a man in a white cadillac

and the young face of a father killed slowly but just as dead from radioactive particles I'm the girl who talks to her dog and her furniture

and her food

I'm the girl who owns a gun and knows how to use it and I'm the girl who doesn't

I'm the girl who knows the catch of breath
when someone might when someone holds one
loaded and aimed close

I'm the girl who tamed wild horses
by talking talking softly talking
moving slowly talking soothing

I'm the girl who practices the zen tea ceremony by herself at home before bed

I'm the girl who drank Guinness extra stout
with 20 year old Irish girls girls
who smuggled guns across the border
smuggled bombs across the border
girls who liked bluegrass music and sang

I'm the girl who wakes up laughing
I'm the girl who gets the burning tower
I'm the girl who stopped a rape in progress
by wielding a broom and screening

by wielding a broom and screaming by hitting the man in the head

with the broom with the wood handle of the broom and screaming screaming screaming

I'm the girl who was not brave but afraid
I'm the girl who talks nice talks polite

like my mama wanted whenever I see fit

I'm still the girl who survives

and I'm the girl who knows violence who believes in violence

I'm the girl who's been left slowly and all of a sudden

left for an art school left for a Perfect Master left for a man left for a plan for a Good job

& a house in the suburbs left for a younger womon

left for a line of cocaine

I'm the girl who knows about pain

I'm the girl who's stayed through car wrecks

angry threats screaming fits

the girl who's held on long past common sense

and I'm the girl who still blushes when someone I love

flirts well across the table

I'm the girl who talks out loud

I'm the girl who makes mistakes mistakes

and I'm the girl who makes changes

I'm the girl who believes in violence

I'm the girl who owns a broom and knows

how to use it

I believe in violence I believe well

in every cell every sense of body

and believing is what frees me frees me

from falling into using it

I'm the girl who can choose

The Electrician's Girl

The prospect of having a girl apprentice was starting to grow on him. When the foreman first told him he'd be working with Kehinde starting next week, Tom Bailey had been pissed as shit. But the morning that he saw her ride up to the job on her bicycle was also the afternoon that he saw her eating her lunch with chopsticks in her solitary corner overlooking the water in front of the building, far away from the rest of the crew. Christ, a Black chick eating with chopsticks! Maybe there's more to this girl than meets the eye, he thought.

He'd heard the affectionate "Fuck You's" that the carpenter girl said to her journeyman. They laughed a lot and she listened with rapt attention to his every word. The carpenter was an old timer due to go out to pasture soon and it seemed that he wanted her to have his legacy of knowledge. The two of them seemed to get along well—she carried his tools and made sure that he got his coffee first when she went out to get the break for the carpentry crew. That happy vision of

companionship wasn't lost on Tom.

He had a slight reputation among the electricians for being good at working with apprentices. Yeah, he'd like to try out a girl. She could

be kind of a cross between kid sister and puppy dog.

Kehinde was strong-looking, solid, like she did some kind of martial art. Her short tower of strength was not exactly the morsel of delicate femininity he had in mind, but hell this was a construction job. And, she had a real appeal he had to admire. She seemed so centered, rooted. She seemed like someone who'd never get distracted or thrown off balance.

He'd seen she had a sweet-faced smile when she talked to that carpenter girl, but she didn't use it much with the crew. She ought to, he thought. It'd help her out a lot more on the job with the other guys, instead of looking so serious all the time like she did. You liked to see a smiling female. It made a man feel good. He'd get her to smile more. He could see himself looking down from a ladder to a laughing little girl looking up to him awaiting orders. Yes, he was really warming up to the idea of having her as his apprentice.

As he'd done with his other apprentices, he started in with lectures on being a good tradesman. "Hopefully. you'll learn from your mistakes. You're gonna make them, but they can be minimized. I try to do a 99% job. I don't say 100%% because once in a while you're gonna cheat. The customer is paying good money and we get good

money for what we do, so I try to go the extra inch and put in each and every thing they specified on the blue print. It may require a bend when you want to do a straight run of pipe for your wire pull but that's what we're being paid for."

Safety and shock prevention were his favorite topics to hold forth on. That always got his other apprentices' interest. New ones were always worried about getting shocks — a real possibility in their work, especially on a renovation job like this one where there was a lot of old wiring and shoddy workmanship to contend with.

It wasn't so much that a guy could get electrocuted, but if you were up on a ladder and got zapped, it was the fall by surprise that could do the damage. 110 volts wasn't so bad, but most of the work nowadays in these commercial office buildings were using 277-volt and 480-volt systems. That could knock a man off a ladder — and that would be your lucky break. If you got hung up in a high voltage circuit, your muscles would freeze and your brain would know what to do, but your body wouldn't be able to respond. You just wouldn't be able to let go. You'd stay there until you fizzled out unless some outside force broke the circuit for you.

When she went about her tasks with him on their troubleshooting assignment, Kehinde seemed not to notice the excitement she generated amongst the other trades on the job just by her being

alive and there. The girl was perpetually neutral.

Don't look at my apprentice in that tone of voice, he 'd said to one of the plumbers on the floor. She remained oblivious to the effect she was creating. He saved a lot of his best lines to use around her and didn't make a dent in her aura, all his good jokes were simply lost on Kehinde. She stayed strictly business and it was like she didn't notice he was a human being with flesh and feelings. This bugged him to no end. Why did she treat him like a tool she kept at a distance? He wasn't like some of these assholes who'd try to bust her chops just for being a female doing construction work.

He knew she could lighten up and joke around. Just this morning he'd seen her be playful with the carpenter girl. He'd heard their gleeful laughter and wanted to move in on their joy. He wanted to join in with a smart remark that would orchestrate their smiles up to him.

He decided that today he would try to get her to break down her insulation and open up and be human with him. He'd talk about safety hazards and precautions. Throughout the whole lecture, he was aching to engage in her interest. Her eyes remained closed, not hostile, but no warmth lived there for him, no recognition for his considerable chagrin. He'd been working with her for weeks now and just couldn't get past those vague answers when he asked her about her life outside of the job. Are you married? Got a boyfriend?" he'd asked her. "It feels like it sometimes," she'd answered, resisting him. "How many feet of wire do you want to pull for this circuit?" She always did that. She didn't leave any space for friendly conversation. He was just trying to make

small talk to get the day to go faster.

It was not that she was openly scornful like his wife or constantly criticizing him like his daffy daughter with her feminist stuff protesting everything that he was paying hard-earned money for her to have. Kehinde wasn't full of explanations like the other girl apprentice who'd been on the job a few months ago, before she was rotated to a different work site. It was like she was in another world sometimes, like she was lightly attached to the earth and would beam in to do a job, but kept herself somewhere else. She didn't cut him off when he spoke, but he sometimes wondered if anybody was at home after she closed him out of consciousness. Kehinde would just not be moved. You couldn't touch this bitch.

It was this very quality that hurt and attracted him the most. She was only partly available. He wouldn't call her a space cadet, but she was elusive sometimes.

That was the state she was in when he decided he'd do the splice live. He wanted to get her to listen to him. He knew she'd pull the switch in time. She was a good little mechanic, but she'd have to give him all her focus as they worked together on the high voltage unit in the electric closet. He really wanted to talk and there was no one else around to give him the energy she ordinarily wouldn't conduct. For some reason, he was dying to have her appreciate him. He wasn't a bad guy. She could give up on a little human feeling for once, Jesus H. Christ. Why couldn't she just listen instead of dismissing him and surprise him for once? Come on baby, give me a little thrill. Show some emotion and give me the shock of my life.

Well, he'd force her to listen to him as they worked. He needed to air some of the bullshit his wife was giving him at home. He interspersed his tale of domestic woe on the home front with instructions. Ordinarily, he'd lay out her end of the job before hand, but this time, he didn't tell her what he wanted her to do until he was ready for each

little thing.

She didn't raise an eyebrow when he said, "OK, now let's do this splice live. You need to see this procedure. First you undo the hot wire... "She'd been following all his instructions and was fully alert, not in her oblivious realm. He liked the fact that she could be depended upon to do the right thing. If only he could teach the kid to talk. Well, he was working on that project. He'd have her chattering away like a chipmunk if it was the last thing he did in life.

He undid the hot wires and had just cut into the neutral wires when his pliers fell down one rung of the ladder—he'd brazenly used the painter's aluminum ladder because he didn't want to go down to the supply room and lug a wooden ladder up the three flights to the roof in the machine room where they were working alone. As he reached down for the pliers caught on the ledge, the neutral wire hit the ladder and he jumped in terror, grabbing hold of the bare hot wire by mistake. At that crucial moment, as if she'd missed a beat, Kehinde didn't pull the circuit disconnect switch. He was hung up with the high voltage sizzling through him, she remaining safely on the insulated mat.

He screamed, but no sound came out of his mouth, his breath cut off, as it happens when you become part of an electric circuit and start to fly. And of course, she wouldn't touch him, lest she too get pulled in and become part of the circuit, all her limbs frozen as well. That fact of electrical life had been a big point he made during one of his first lectures to her. But didn't she see the wooden two by four that she could use to knock him off the ladder to safety? Why didn't she pull the circuit disconnect switch? He couldn't let go of the circuit on his own, but his brain was conscious, though losing it fast

She looked up at him and he saw her shrug her shoulders, like he'd often seen her do when she finished a chops-breaking task that the foreman had assigned to her as a punishment, something admittedly unpleasant, but which she wasn't going to get upset about.

He knew then that she did see and hear everything, but she simply wasn't going to give up on any energy or reactions. What a bitch.

But she was finally giving him his first real smile of human sympathy. There was the compassion he'd been striving to get from her for so long. For the very first time, she raised those eloquent eyebrows which were usually furled in concentration on the job at hand and looked him full in the face. At long last she focused her dark eyes on him with a regard he'd so often yearned for — just a simple acknowledgement

of his humanity, a look of understanding and caring.

And Tom Bailey was happy. He was breathlessly happy. My God, all she had to do was give me a brief smile and I can't breathe. I'm so happy I could die, he thought. Maybe things will be different between us now. She'd pay maybe even full attention to him when he talked, because they'd just had this sympathetic connection It was worth nearly dying for. All he'd wanted was for her to notice him, some sympathy, a warm feeling between them. I just know we can be friends now, he thought. But it was really too late to give it much thought, because now, damnit to hell, he was fucking dead.

En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando Cuentas A Las Nuestras

WATCH FOR FALLING ROCKS

The first time I drove from El Paso to San Diego, I saw a sign that read "Watch for Falling Rocks." And though I watched and waited for rocks to roll down the steep cliff walls and attack my car and me, I never saw any falling rocks. Today, one of the things I'm most afraid of are the rocks we throw at each other. And the resultant guilt we carry like a corpse strapped to our backs for having thrown rocks. We colored women have memories like elephants. The slightest hurt is recorded deep within. We do not forget the injury done to us and we do not forget the injury we have done another. For unfortunately we do not have hides like elephants. Our vulnerability is measured by our capacity for openness, intimacy. And we all know that our own kind is driven through shame or self-hatred to poke at all our open wounds. And we know they know exactly where the hidden wounds are.

I keep track of all distinctions. Between past and present. Pain and pleasure. Living and surviving. Resistance and capitulation. Will and circumstances. Between life and death. Yes. I am scrupulously accurate. I have become a keeper of accounts. —Irena Klepfisz¹

One of the changes that I've seen since *This Bridge Called My Back* was published² is that we no longer allow white women to efface us or suppress us. Now we do it to each other. We have taken over the missionary's "let's civilize the savage role," fixating on the "wrongness" and moral or political inferiority of some of our sisters, insisting on a profound difference between oneself and the *Other*. We have been indoctrinated into adopting the old imperialist ways of conquering and dominating, adopting a way of confrontation based on differences while standing on the ground of ethnic superiority.

In the "dominant" phase of colonialism, European colonizers exercise direct control of the colonized, destroy the native legal and cultural systems, and negate non-European civilizations in order to ruthlessly exploit the resources of the subjugated with the excuse of attempting to "civilize" them. Before the end of this phase, the natives internalize Western culture. By the time we reach the "neocolonialist" phase, we've accepted the white colonizers' system of values, attitudes, morality, and modes of production. ³ It is not by chance that in

Texas the more rural towns' Chicano neighborhoods are called *colonias* rather than *barrios*.

There have always been those of us who have "cooperated" with the colonizers. It's not that we have been "won" over by the dominant culture, but that it has exploited pre-existing power relations of subordination and subjugation within our native societies. The great White ripoff and they are still cashing in. Like our exploiters who fixate on the inferiority of the natives, we fixate on the fucked-upness of our sisters. Like them we try to impose our version of "the ways things should be"; we try to impose one's self on the Other by making her the recipient of one's negative elements, usually the same ones that the Anglo projected on us. Like them, we project our self-hatred on her; we stereotype her; we make her generic.

JUST HOW ETHNIC ARE YOU?

One of the reasons for this hostility among us is the forced cultural penetration, the rape of the colored by the white, with the colonizers depositing their perspective, their language, their values in our bodies. External oppression is paralleled with our internalization of that oppression. And our acting out from that oppression. They have us doing to those within our own ranks what they have done and continue to do to us—Othering people. That is, isolating them, pushing them out of the herd, ostracizing them. The internalization of negative images of ourselves, our self-hatred, poor self esteem, makes our own people the Other. We shun the white-looking Indian, the "high yellow" Black woman, the Asian with the white lover, the Native woman who brings her white girl friend to the Pow Wow, the Chicana who doesn't speak Spanish, the academic, the uneducated. Her difference makes her a person we can't trust. Para que sea "legal," she must pass the ethnic legitimacy test we have devised. And it is exactly our internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines (this part of me is Mexican, this Indian) marked out and woe to any sister or any part of us that steps out of our assigned places, woe to anyone who doesn't measure up to our standards of ethnicity. Sino cualifica, if she fails to pass the test, le aventamos mierda en la cara, le aventamos piedras, la aventamos. We throw shit in her face, we throw rocks, we kick her out. Como gallos de pelea nos atacamos unas a las otras—mexicanas de nacimiento contra the born-again mexicanas. Like fighting cocks, razor blades strapped to our fingers we slash out at each other. We have turned our anger against ourselves. And our anger is immense. Es un acido que corroe.

INTERNAL AFFAIRS O LAS QUE NIEGAN A SU GENTE

Tu traición yo la llevo aquí muy dentro, la llevo dentro de mi alma dentro de mi corazón.

Tu traición.

—Cornelio Reyna⁵

I get so tired of constantly struggling with my sisters. The more we have in common, including love, the greater the heartache between us, the more we hurt each other. It's excruciatingly painful, this constant snarling at our own shadows. Anything can set the conflict in motion: the lover getting more recognition by the community, the friend getting a job with higher status, a break-up. As one of

my friends said, "We can't fucking get along."

So we find ourselves *entreguerras*,⁶ a kind of civil war among intimates, an in-class, in-race, in-house fighting, a war with strategies, tactics that are our coping mechanism, that once were our survival skills and which we now use upon one another⁷ producing intimate terrorism—a modern form of *las guerras floridas*, the war of the flowers that the Aztecs practiced in order to gain captives for the sacrifices. Only now we are each other's victims, we offer the *Other* to our politically correct altar.

El deniego. The hate we once cast at our oppressors we now fling at women of our own race. Reactionary—we have gone to the other extreme—denial of our own. We struggle for power, compete, vie for control. Like kin, we are there for each other, but like kin we come to blows. And the differences between us and this new Other are not racial but ideological, not metaphysical but psychological. Nos negamos a si mismas y el deniego nos causa daño.

BREAKING OUT OF THE FRAME

I'm standing at the sea end of the truncated Berkeley pier. A boat had plowed into the black posts gouging out a few hundred feet of structure, cutting the pier in two. I stare at the sea, surging silverplated, between me and the loped-off corrugated arm, the wind whipping my hair. I look down, my head and shoulders, a shadow on the sea. Yemayá pours strings of light over my dull jade, flickering body, bubbles pop out of my ears. I feel the tension easing and, for the first time in months, the litany of work yet to do, of deadlines, that sings incessantly in my head, blows away with the wind.

Oh, Yemayá, I shall speak the words

you lap against the pier.

But as I turn away I see in the distance, a ship's fin fast approaching. I see fish heads lying listless in the sun, smell the stench of pollution in the waters.

From where I stand, queridas carnalas — in a feminist position — I see, through critical lens with variable focus, that we must not drain our energy breaking down the male/white frame (the whole of Western culture) but turn to our own kind and change our terms of reference. As long as we see the world and our experiences through white eyes — in a dominant/subordinate way — we're trapped in the tar and pitch of the old manipulative and strive-for-power ways.

Even those of us who don't want to buy in get sucked into the vortex of the dominant culture's fixed oppositions, the duality of superiority and inferiority, of subject and object. Some of us, to get out of the internalized neocolonial phase, make for the fringes, the Borderlands. And though we have not broken out of the white frame, we at least see it for what it is. Questioning the values of the dominant culture which imposes fundamental difference on those on the "wrong" side of the good/bad dichotomy is the first step. Responding to the *Other* not as irrevocably different is the second step. By highlighting similarities, downplaying divergences, that is, by rapprochement between self and Other it is possible to build a syncretic relationship. At the basis of such a relationship lies an understanding

of the effects of colonization and its resultant pathologies.

We have our work cut out for us. Nothing is more difficult than identifying emotionally with a cultural alterity, with the Other. Alter: to make different; to castrate. Altercate: to dispute angrily. Alter ego: another self or another aspect of oneself. Alter idem: another of the same kind. Nothing is harder than identifying with an interracial identity, with a mestizo identity. One has to leave the permanent boundaries of a fixed self, literally "leave" oneself and see oneself through the eyes of the Other. Cultural identity is "nothing more nor less than the mean between selfhood and otherness..."8 Nothing scares the Chicana more than a quasi-Chicana; nothing disturbs a Mexican more than an acculturated Chicana; nothing agitates a Chicana more than a Latina who lumps her with the norteamericanas. It is easier to retreat to the safety of the difference behind racial, cultural and class borders. Because our awareness of the Other as object often swamps our awareness of ourselves as subject, it is hard to maintain a fine balance between cultural ethnicity and the continuing survival of that culture, between traditional culture and an evolving hybrid culture. How much must remain the same, how much must change.

For most of us our ethnicity is still the issue. Ours continues to be a struggle of identity — not against a white background so much as against a colored background. Ya no estamos afuera o atras del marco de la pintura — we no longer stand outside nor behind the frame of the

painting. We are both the foreground, the background and the figures predominating. Whites are not the central figure, they are not even in the frame, though the frame of reference is still white, male, and heterosexual. But the white is still there, invisible, under our skin — we have subsumed the white.

EL DESENGAÑO/DISILLUSIONMENT

And yes I have some criticism, some self-criticism. And no I will not make everything nice. There is shit among us we need to sift through. Who knows, there may be some fertilizer in it. I've seen collaborative efforts between us end in verbal abuse, cruelty and trauma. I've seen collectives fall apart, dumping their ideals by the wayside and treating each other worse than they'd treat a rabid dog. My momma said, "Never tell other people our business, never divulge family secrets." Chicano dirt you do not air out in front of white folks, nor lesbian dirty laundry in front of heterosexuals. The things cultural stay with la Raza. Colored feminists must present a united front in front of whites and other groups. But the fact is we are not united. (I've come to suspect that unity is another Anglo invention like their one sole god and the myth of the monopole.⁹) We are not going to cut through *la mierda* by sweeping the dirt under the rug.

We have a responsibility to each other, certain commitments. The leap into self-affirmation goes hand in hand with being critical of self. Many of us walk around with reactionary, self-righteous attitudes. We preach certain political behaviors and theories and we do fine with writing about them. Though we want others to live their lives by them, we do not live them. When we are called on it, we go into a self-defensive mode and denial just like whites did when we started asking them to be accountable for their race and class biases.

LAS OPUESTAS / THOSE IN OPPOSITION

In us, intra-and cross cultural hostilities surface in not so subtle put-downs. Las no comprometidas, las que negan a sus gente. Fruncemos las caras y negamos toda responsabilidad. Where some of us racially mixed people are stuck in now is denial and its damaging effects. Denial of the white aspects that we've been forced to acquire, denial of our sisters who for one reason or another cannot "pass" as 100% ethnic — as if such a thing exists. Racial purity, like language purity, is a fallacy. Denying the reality of who we are destroys the basis needed from which to talk honestly and deeply about the issues between us. We cannot make any real connections because we are not touching each other. So we sit facing each other and before the words escape our mouths

the real issues are blanked in our consciousness, erased before they register because it hurts too much to talk about them, because it makes us vulnerable to the hurt the carnala may dish out, because we've been wounded too deeply and too often in the past. So we sit, a paper face before another paper face — two people who suddenly cease to be real. La no compasiva con la complaciente, lo incomunicado atorado en sus gargantas.

We, the new Inquisitors, swept along with the "swing to the right" of the growing religious and political intolerance, crusade against racial heretics, mow down with the sickle of righteous anger our dissenting sisters. The issue (in all aspects of life) has always been when to resist changes and when to be open to them. Right now, this

rigidity will break us.

RECOBRANDO/ RECOVERING

Una luz fria y cenicienta bañada en el plata palida del amanecer entra a mi escritorio and I think about the critical stages we feminists of color are going through, chiefly that of learning to live with each other as carnalas, parientes, amantes, as kin, as friends, as lovers. Looking back on the road that we've walked on during the last decade, I see many emotional, psychological, spiritual, political gains—primarily developing an understanding and acceptance of the spirituality of our root ethnic cultures. This has given us the ground from which to see that our spiritual lives are not split from our daily acts. En recobrando our affinity with nature and her forces (deities), we have "recovered" our ancient identity, digging it out like dark clay, pressing it to our current identity, molding past and present, inner and outer. Our clay-streaked faces acquiring again images of our ethnic self and self-respect taken from us by the colonizadores. And if we've suffered loses, if often in the process we have momentarily "misplaced" our carnalahood, our sisterhood, there beside us always are the women, las mujeres. And that is enough to keep us going.

By grounding in the earth of our native spiritual identity, we can build up our personal and tribal identity. We can reach out for the clarity we need. Burning sage and sweetgrass by itself won't cut it, but

it can be a basis from which we act.

And yes, we are elephants with long memories, but scrutinizing the past with binocular vision and training it on the juncture of past with present, and identifying the options on hand and mapping out future roads will ensure us survival.

So if we won't forget past grievances, let us forgive. Carrying the ghosts of past grievances *no vale la pena*. It is not worth the grief. It

keeps us from ourselves and each other; it keeps us from new relationships. We need to cultivate other ways of coping. I'd like to think that the in-fighting that we presently find ourselves doing is only a stage in the continuum of our growth, an offshoot of the conflict that the process of biculturation spawns, a phase of the internal colonization process, one that will soon cease to hold sway over our lives. I'd like to see it as a skin we will shed as we are born into the 21st century.

And now in these times of the turning of the century, of the harmonic conversion, of the end of *El Quinto Sol* (as the ancient Aztecs named our present age), it is time we began to get out of the state of opposition and into *rapprochement*, time to get our heads, words, ways out of white territory. It is time that we broke out of the invisible white frame and stood on the ground of our own ethnic being.

⁹ Physicists are searching for a single law of physics under which all other laws will fall.



This essay was included in *Making Face*, *Making Soul | Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa (1990, Aunt Lute Books, PO Box 410687, SF, CA 94141).

¹ Irena Klepfisz, Keeper of Accounts (Montpelier, VT: Sinister Wisdom, 1982), 85.

² According to Chela Sandoval, the publication of *Bridge* marked the end of the second wave of the women's movement in its previous form. *U.S. Third World Feminist Criticism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness*, a dissertation in process.

³ Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," "Race," Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985, 80-81. 4 JanMohamed, 81.

⁵ A Chicano from Texas who sings and plays *bajo-sexto* in his *música norteña/conjunto*. "Tu Traición" is from the album 15 Exitasos, Reyna Records, 1981.

⁶ Entreguerras, entremundos/Inner Wars Among the Worlds is the title of my forthcoming book of narratives/novels.

⁷ Sarah Hoagland, "Lesbian Ethics: Intimacy & Self-Understanding," Bay Area Women's News, May/June, 1987, Vol. 1 No. 2, p. 7.

⁸ Nadine Gordimer, quoted in JanMohamed's essay, 88.

I Am Not Your Princess

especially for Dee Johnson

Sandpaper between two cultures which tear one another apart I'm not a means by which you can reach spiritual understanding or even learn to do beadwork I'm only willing to tell you how to make fry bread 1 cup flour, spoon of salt, spoon of baking powder Add milk or water or beer until it holds together Slap each piece into rounds Let rest Fry in hot grease until golden This is Indian food only if you know that Indian is a government word which has nothing to do with our names for ourselves I won't chant for you I admit no spirituality to you I will not sweat with you or ease your guilt with fine turtle tales I will not wear dancing clothes to read poetry or explain hardly anything at all I don't think your attempts to understand us are going to work so I'd rather you left us in whatever peace we can still scramble up after all you continue to do If you send me one more damn flyer about how to heal myself for \$300 with special feminist counseling I'll probably set fire to something If you tell me one more time that I'm wise I'll throw up on you Look at me See my confusion loneliness worrying about all our fear struggles to keep what little is left for us Look at my heart not your fantasies Please don't ever

again tell me about your Cherokee great-great grandmother

[&]quot;I Am Not Your Princess" was published in Chrystos' Not Vanishing (1988, Press Gang, 603 Powell St., Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1H2 Canada). This is how it appears in Not Vanishing.

Don't assume I know every other Native Activist in the world personally That I even know the names of all the tribes or can pronounce names I've never heard or that I'm expert at the peyote stitch If you ever again tell me how strong I am I'll lay down on the ground & moan so you'll see at last my human weakness like your own I'm not strong I'm scraped I'm blessed with life while so many I've known are dead I have work to do dishes to wash a house to clean There is no magic See my simple cracked hands which have washed the same things you wash

See my eyes dark with fear in a house by myself late at night
See that to pity me or to adore me are the same
1 cup flour, spoon of salt, spoon of baking powder & liquid to hold
remember this is only my recipe There are many others
Let me rest
here
at least

We Learn

At school we learn the word 'dog' cannot bite we learn words are the map not the territory Terror nonetheless in certain words "tumor" "malignancy" along the contours of your breast a laying on of hands all our disbelieving prayers speaking in a new tongue "contained" "no metasteses" belief Belief beyond words, certainty: you will not die this year. chemotherapy would be a crime against our bodies. Floods follow this terrain earth slides away uncharted "prophesy" too large a sound dictionaries show no entry under "I have a knowing" Instead I use the word "love" to set a cord of survival swaying between us (at school we are taught the word 'love' cannot embrace but they have not heard our hearts pronounce it)

Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum (#32, 1987)

Cancer in Two Voices (Chapter One)*

(Sandy)

February 19, 1985

I am on my way to Winnipeg for a conference. We had, as always, much difficulty separating. Her need of me. Mine to distance. The ways we tear at each other for comfort and reassurance. My fear of losing myself in her need of me. Jane and Linda help us to listen and console each other.

I feel misgivings about all the travel I have planned for this year. There is a frenzied rush to much of my work that leaves little room for pleasure. I remain harried and unsatisfied with one task merely leading to the next. For now, I immerse myself in details—lists—notes—and find the usual soothing that results from the accomplishment of assigned tasks elusive. I am worried about the changes in her body but trust — mostly trust—that it is nothing to be alarmed about and her anxiety is more habitual than necessary. She goes for the results of the second test and needle biopsy tomorrow with Anna and I'll call after work for the results. No need to worry about it in advance. There will be plenty of time to worry if that becomes necessary.

February 22, 1985

I am on my way home. Barbara has cancer. It is fast-growing and has already spread to her lymph nodes. More testing, then a mastectomy. I lie here in a Holiday Inn in Winnipeg, my mind skittering away from it, "it" being somewhere between mastectomy and death. I make lists in an effort to maintain a sense that what I do will matter. Is it that I feel the worst at once, or is the story Itell myself necessary so that I can handle the simpler eventualities? I remember Deena's story about the writing of the Book of Hags. She finished it in December of 1976, her exploration about the nature and function of cancer attacking the breasts of so many young women. What did it mean and why was this the form it took? Only weeks later, she was diagnosed, her own breast being attacked by cancer. How did she know to prepare for her own battle? What was

Cancer in Two Voices by Sandy Butler and Barbara Rosenblum will be available September 1991, \$10.95, from: Spinsters Book Co., POB 410687, S.F., CA 94141.

the genesis of the *Book of Hags?* How does the subject matter present itself for exploration? The fears announce themselves as preparation for reality? When does "knowing" begin?

I want so desperately to engage with Barbara, with this disease in a loving and useful way and in my racing to strategize and to plan-I lose all feeling. I cannot yet know what this will mean and only hear the terror in her voice.

(Barbara) February 20, 1985

I am a sociologist and that is a big part of my identity I was drawn to my discipline because of many natural and instinctive ways I look at the world I look at systems and their sub-parts and how they all interact. And mainly, I look at people and figure out what makes them tick

During my years of formal training to become a sociologist, I learned and developed very fine observational skills. A tone in the voice; the raising of an eyebrow for emphasis; the gesture that accompanies the sentence and gives it meaning and emotion; and something I borrowed from art and philosophy, an appreciation of a person's posture. Everything who one is can be seen in posture, in gesture.

I'm very good at my work. And I'm proud of how good I am at reading micro-behavior.

So when the doctor came into the room, folder in hand, comporting herself firmly and with an air of ordinary, matter-of-fact efficiency, I searched for every clue — every curve in the face, the lines of the eyes, the hand (if it would reach out to me), the axis and position of the head (if it was engaged)... I searched for clues to anticipate what she would tell me. If the result of the test was positive or malignant. There was no clue, only her words.

"I m glad you went for a second opinion because it shows that it is malignant."

I shut my eyes and saw absolute black, no lines of red or purple, pure black. My agitation lifted me off the table and I started walking around in small steps in the examining room, working off the tension. I thought I might put my fist through the wall.

And then when I opened my eyes, I couldn't see too well. Or hear anything too well either. Anna, my good friend who was with me, took the notes, handled the paperwork received the forms for the additional tests, escorted me through the distorted corridors of the hospital and finally drove me, in my brand new car, my first new car, that no one else but Sandy has driven, home.

How to see what is there. Simply. Plainly. Without denial. Everything is about seeing and how to see, what to see, knowing what you are looking at, figuring out its meaning in terms of diagnosis and prognosis. Biopsies, machines, microscopes — how to see it all.

They need mechanical, electronic, and computer extensions of all the human senses to see what disease process and its tributaries have already ravaged my body. They need mechanisms that fit in the system of diagnostics, the way a camera is an extension of the hand, the eyes, and memory. They have to penetrate the invisible with instruments that extend vision into unknown places. CAT scans, x-rays, radioisotope scans are all ways of seeing, of extending the eyes. Ultrasound extends our ears and uses wave technology to infer, model and image the internal spaces, using the differential densities of tissue as the basis for imaging. Computerized thermography uses heat, an extension of touch, and makes images of the body based on different levels of heat given off by different organs and tissues.

Some diagnoses are as elementary as palpation, touching a lymph node lightly and sensing its swollen form. Other tests require that my body be illuminated by radioactive materials so that my inner parts glow on a screen, making computerized images. Imagism. Imagistics.

Then, with this data, they chart and classify me. What other symptoms are included under the family resemblances? Then, on another level, knowing the pathological process, what predictions of related symptoms will be generated?

How does the doctor know if there are micrometastases in my body? The doctor doesn't. It's all supersonic, frontier electronics, perpetrated on this still stoneage human form.

The point is that I am going to die earlier than my average survival would have been because of medical incompetence. Today, I have a stage 4 breast cancer which gives me a survival of between 5 and 8 years. It travelled far into my system. But statistical evidence is so crazy anyhow. There are so many individual differences that comparability of cases is strained, if not forced. How many people who received exactly the same protocols responded exactly the same way? But my training is to see generalities, tendencies, and trends, not individual cases and I must learn the new logic of individual cases, recoveries, and miracles.

(Sandy)

The shock has worn off a bit but I continue to feel frightened. It took so many years to allow my dependence on her, but now that I have, I feel desperate not to lose her. The tests have begun and

I insist upon being in the room with her as they place her on a metal table, wheel her into a tunnel-like apparatus, see the machines slowly and inexorably moving up and back over the length of her body. She lies so still on the table, not moving as she is instructed. I stare at the screen producing color images that I cannot decipher. A young man sits immobile before it making notes. I cannot see what he writes and cannot tell from his posture or expression if there is danger on the screen. She avoids looking at me, just stares up at the ceiling as my eyes race around the room trying to understand the technology, the stillness. In one corner, a young intern reads the daily paper. In another, a doctor makes notes on her chart for the staff. Everywhere there is silence. I would speak to Barbara but cannot imagine what to say. I hope my presence is of help to her. It isn't to me. I feel superfluous. Helpless.

There are so many dangerous possibilities. So many symptoms. A lump under her armpit may mean further spread. Tendonitis may mean metastasis to the bone. Dizziness — it may be the brain. A sore throat, symptomatic of cancer of the larynx. There are endless possibilities and right now, as I stand over her, they all seem ominous.

Then we sit and wait for the results in an empty room. Again, I cannot imagine what to say. My hand does not move to reach out to her. I am encased in my own terror and cannot join her in her own. Like the staff in the examining room, we sit side by side without moving, in silence.

"Everything seems just fine," we are told. "No further spread that we can see." We turn to each other then, our hands reach to touch and we allow ourselves to breathe. We celebrate that small victory with an expensive dinner. At least, we reassure ourselves and each other, it is only what it is. It isn't more.

Our level of tension is cyclical. Laughter and tears blend, our moods are labile, and my desire to protect her is sometimes overwhelming. I re-read Audre Lorde's distinction between fear as an appropriate response to something real and anxiety as succumbing to a shapeless and formless terror. I am aware of needing to find a balance between my need to protect her — to throw myself across her to keep the cancer away and respecting her need to proceed through this experience as she needs to, allowing all the people in her life to love her and not be in the way. My own sense of balance eludes me now and I stumble.

(Barbara)

Sandy goes with me for all the tests We've been together for six years and yet, she sometimes feels like a stranger to me. She has been unusually quiet these last few days of testing. They put me into machines, Sandy sits in a chair nearby watching. She cannot ask them to stop the test, to comfort me. We sit together in waiting rooms, one after the other, with long silences and yellow pads. The only stuff worth talking about is the medical information, it seems Words about us just hang there, become useless They are revealed as clumsy instruments of communication, so she and I are mute. Dumb. This woman of so many words, so many verbal styles, presentations, public speeches is mute with me and that is how I know — in part — how deadly serious this is. We cannot use words to build bridges between us, as we have done in the past. We are each trapped in our terror and cannot find our way towards each other.

(Sandy)

It wasn't until the skin around her nipple began to pucker that she grew frightened and called from New York asking me to arrange a second opinion. I made an appointment with an older established woman in a prestigious hospital. That was the turning point for her, I think. That was the point at which she began gathering information outside the public health system. The shift from public to private was a major one, for it took a while for us to understand she had been misdiagnosed The lump we found in March of 1984 was not diagnosed as cancer until February of 1985. During that time, it grew from 2 cc to 6 cc, her breast enlarged to nearly twice its original size, a mammogram that B. demanded was taken, read incorrectly as negative by a radiologist who never examined her. She saw three doctors and, still, no one was concerned. Below the index of suspicion, she was told by the surgeon at Kaiser three weeks before the consultant's diagnosis of cancer. Told to stop drinking coffee for fibrocystic disease; they would watch it.

The ambivalence she suffers is painful for me. The overwhelming sense that she should — somehow — have known. She should have insisted on something. And yet she did everything she could. She insisted on a mammogram when they would not have ordered one. She insisted on the tests that have not been routinely ordered. She drove herself to be the best consumer she could, in the same way she drives herself to be the best at everything she does.

Once the diagnosis was made, once the cancer was discovered, she began to research obsessively. Chemotherapy first. Surgery first. Radiation with lumpectomy was ruled out. There was a blur of days filled with doctors, examinations, treatment recommendations, yellow pads filled with questions and answers, and B. with her pocket tape recorder recording every doctor's answers in case she grew too anxious and could not hear what was being said.

(Barbara)

And then there is another problem: the differences in the recommendations given by different specializations. Surgeons tend to see breast cancer as a local disease, so they want to cut first. Oncologists see cancer mostly systematically, as an immune system disease, and they say attack with chemotherapy. And then, when I went to see three different oncologists, and I got three different opinions anyhow, it threw me into a crisis of uncertainty.

Now I make lists of questions, gather up my tape recorder and am lucid, direct, insistent, and clear in my repeated interviews with the series of private "experts" Sandy and I now consult. I have chosen an oncologist finally, a tough-minded woman, and developed a treatment plan. The "best." A "top man," as my mother would call it. Chemotherapy first, then surgery, and then more chemotherapy, then radiation, then more chemotherapy. It is very aggressive treatment with devastating side effects, loss of hair, vomiting, menopause, fatigue, but seems the only chance of controlling this virulent force that has invaded my body.

Medicine offers no certainty but I must trust someone. I pick Kathy G. She is a tough, gentle, sensitive, coolly professional woman a few years younger than I. She will be my lifeline. She will become the center of my life. I will visit her for a year and a half for my treatments. I will fall in love with her, hold on to her every word, her every hope for me. I will turn to her for optimism, realism, help, understanding, drugs. She is my doctor, my hope, my survival.

Two days ago, I filed a malpractice suit with an attorney because a series of incompetent doctors failed to make an accurate diagnosis of breast cancer. I hate them but I'm also filled with self-loathing — self doubt. What should I have done? Why didn't I insist upon something? Why didn't I know better? But I never learned to recognize a good doctor. Public medicine was all I had ever experienced. Despite my "class travel," I still went to clinics, just as I had when I was 10 — waiting for my glasses to be given to me for free.

Often now, when I go to the doctor I remember my father. When he was eleven, two years before his Bar-Mitzvah my father became an apprentice to what is called in Polish/Yiddish a feldsher. While there is no adequate translation for this phrase, my father says it could be translated as "paramedic" or "country doctor," but when he talks about feldshers in a nonselfconscious way, he calls them half-doctors. A feldsher was a Government-certified, somewhat trained medical person who did the following:applied leeches for bloodletting, applied heated cups to lacerations he made on the back in order to draw blood; he pulled teeth; he lanced and then filled abcesses with iodized gauze; he was in charge of the health of local villagers and, when there was even an eruption of one case of a contagious disease, such as what my father calls in Yiddish scarletina (scarlet fever), he would report it to the authorities of the local medical district. My father was a feldsher's apprentice and, had he remained in Europe, would have probably become a feldsher himself.

All of my life I believed that if I became ill, I would go on the subway to the hospital, wait patiently to see the doctor and be appreciative of the small hurried bits of time they proferred. It was the only experience I ever had. Mass medicine for the mass of people — I was one of the masses. I never had a private physician, had never been to private hospital. Never to a lawyer's office. Now I go to the Heads of Departments, the Chief of Oncology who refers me to the Head of Radiology and the Head of Surgery and they spend time with me. Not Kaiser's quota of one patient every twelve minutes.

March 6, 1985

Exactly one week and three hours after I learned I had cancer I had a meeting in our house of 20 women who would be involved in my healing and care-taking. It was a conscious and deliberate choice to mobilize a battalion of friends to help and assist me in every phase of fighting my disease. When the doctor told me I had cancer I was forced to stand alone on a ledge so steep and so scary that I reached out my hand — grabbed the outstretched hands of the women who form my community.

I assembled them so I could tell them at once of my illness Oddly, because I am a teacher I found myself making notes as if for a lecture. I outlined what I needed from them. I listed the concrete ways Sandy and I would need help. It was all neatly categorized and outlined as I would for an intro class. Being the center of attention was an unusual experience for me and I was nervous and began to read uncomfortably from my notes. Torn between my usual feeling of wanting to be competent and feeling grateful for the room so full of love and concern, after a while I found myself no longer needing my notes for my heart

began to speak. Without censor and artifice, the words found themselves. I began by sharing the basic information about my cancer, the treatment plan I had chosen to pursue and as I began to hear myself speak, became aware of how I was lingering on the medical information as a way to postpone saying the more deeply felt words that were in my heart. As I watched their faces react to my words, as well as the silences between them, I came to understand that I am only the first among our friends to have cancer. There will be others. As the graphs and statistics show, we will hear about more cases as we grow older. Such a weighty responsibility, to be the first, yet it gave me a purpose. I am trying to live self-consciously (and perhaps die selfconsciously) in an exemplary manner. Many of my fiends will see their future in the way I handle mine.

I told them that I needed to feel useful and to be needed. They spoke of their feelings and love for me, their commitment to the shared struggle of winning the battle against cancer growing in my body and dedication to whatever was needed to win the battle. The chemotherapy was the strongest currently available, hopefully doing enough to match and conquer the formidable enemy that had invaded me. There would be a battle waged inside my body and I would need support, nurturance, caring, diversion, laughter, and safety to endure the 18 months that lay ahead. These 20 women and others across the country would serve as my companions.

(Sandy)

Isee her emotional vulnerability, the trembling of her chin when she speaks publicly. She acknowledges my greater ease with the public self by whispering to me before the women gathered, "This is like my first keynote speech," referring to the speeches I made regularly as part of my work. Her late awareness of the love, respect, and concern she generates are unfamiliar, she cannot quite trust these feelings. She simply has no frame of reference for them. I too, found myself caught in old forms and patterns. After she spoke, I found myself being charming, gracious, welcoming—all the social skills I use without thinking. Appalled at the ease with which such forms blot out feelings, I just as unexpectedly began to cry and spoke publicly, perhaps for the first time, utterly without charm, grace or style. From my heart.

(Barbara)

That night changed the way I spoke. Since then, many friends have reminded me of my own words. "Your life is not a rehearsal. It is what it is and you must live it." "Don't wait to finish your novel to have a baby." "The days when you want to get dressed up, look outrageous put those gold earrings on to teach a class, do it. Do it all. There is no time to worry if you are too dressed up to go to work. Do it. The restaurant you want to go to but is slightly too expensive. Do it and put it on a credit card. The orchestra opera tickets you've always wanted but sat in the balcony because you are saving for a "rainy day" — buy the orchestra seats. The trip you wanted to take but you were waiting until next year. Do it. You might not have next year. Do it now. Do it all. Live your dreams. Live it."

After I was finished speaking, I was asked to stretch out on the floor and the women gathered in a circle around me, each of them laying hands upon my body. Rituals and those who practice them are strange to me but it felt soothing and I could hear the sounds of women weeping and feel their energy being passed from their bodies to mine.

Earlier in the day I had spoken to Deena in Los Angeles who suggested I find a visualization for the moment the chemotherapy entered my body for the first time. I asked the women in my healing circle to visualize the same image at the time of the injection/invasion. It was to be at 4:00 PM on Monday. As I lay upon the floor encircled by their bodies, their hands, and their love, I began to sense the power of such a suggestion.

(Sandy)

Now that the house has emptied, the images that keep intruding are those of a malevolent circus. The kind in the movies of the 40's where the final chase scene takes place on a carousel gone mad with the chilling voice of the laughing fat woman as seen through the mirrors of the fun house. My images those of tightropes I must walk to keep balanced between my life and ours. The highwire act or juggling to keep us distinct yet joined. The speed with which the disease is growing in her body like a rollercoaster out of control. My moods are wide ranging and unpredictable. I marvel at her. I marvel at me. And sometimes I want her to tell me she's sorry for getting cancer and ruining our lives together. And sometimes I'm angry at her for getting it. Other times I want to tell her that I am sorry for my letting her get cancer and not making her go to a better doctor. And most of the time, I lie in her arms grateful for the life we have together.

Pelvic Mass Etiology

for all the people who say or think, "Barbara, why are you dong this? Again?"

 $oldsymbol{1}$ think it all started with moving to Oakland The fact I took birth control pills for fourteen years My neurotic desire for a child It's proof of bad karma in the second chakra It's related to Halley's comet Due to the fact I started menstruating early It's caused by the patriarchy By racism Anti-semitism Being on welfare Or maybe it's sunspot activity It's something I made because I want to be mutilated It's punishment for enjoying sex too much The wrong kind of sex The wrong kind of partner It's because I eat the wrong foods It's choosing the wrong acupuncturist The wrong Chinese herbs The wrong visualization technique It's too much vitamin C It's my father trying to make me his son It's this hard rock of anger It's blaming myself It's forgiveness refused It's being an anarchist under advanced capitalism It's my tax dollars Invading Nicaragua Investing in apartheid It's not being a tax resister It's going to jail in South Carolina to protest nukes More Cesium in their water

Reprinted from Past, Present & Future Passions—Poems by Barbara Ruth, 1986, W.A.T.R.

Than anywhere else in the world And that's what I lived on It's being kicked in the belly by cops in Philadelphia And then refusing to let the male ER doctor Examine my bleeding ass It's too much resistance Or not enough It's my great aunt kicked in the head By cossacks' horses It's my father's family bombed on reservation Redeve Then sedated by condominium whiskey It's the persecution of the Peyote church It's too many psychedelics when I was a hippie It's something I do In order to get post-surgical morphine It's something I do for attention I do it in order to help The surgeons work out their karma I do it to meet the x-ray technicians I do it in order to write this poem It's punishment for being bad For doing something so bad I forget what it is But it probably happened before I was five Or maybe before I was born It's afflicted planets in my natal chart It's genetic propensity An unlucky roll of the chromosomes It's having no homeland Having my homeland taken away It's forced relocation It's Big Mountain It's the Golan Heights It's Thanksgiving and Christmas Coming too close together It's the long nights of winter It's being battered by people I loved As a child As a wife As a dyke It's the toxins I breathe

It's the polar caps melting It's the Coriolis effect.

I think it's the problem of entropy
The body's, the world's
Rushing toward ever increasing chaos
And I'm afraid there's not enough love medicine
In the whole universe
To make it stop hurting
To make me ever be well.



Sarita Johnson Calvo (#39, 1989)

A/part of the Community

I'm a Lesbian sick and tired of being sick and tired. I'm a Lesbian sick and tired of being chronically ill while Lesbians put their physical, emotional and financial energy into AIDS. Here in the dyke community immune system illnesses are knocking large numbers of womyn on their butts, sometimes for life.

Environmental Illness (E.I.) (also known by dozens of other names such as Chemical Hypersensitivity, Complex Allergy Syndrome, etc.) and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (also known as Chronic Epstein-Barr Virus Syndrome, Chronic Viral Syndrome, etc.) have been sweeping through the Lesbian community for roughly the same amount of time AIDS has been hitting the gay boys. While these illnesses are due to damaged immune systems and can totally incapacitate for life, they rarely lead directly to death. Death is what makes AIDS so popular a cause. AIDS is a killer! It's striking people down in their prime! Such a tragedy early death is, such a tragedy! People respond to this type of drama. Early death is a tragedy, but equally as tragic is a lifetime of being too ill to rise out of bed. And both E.I. and Chronic Fatigue can do this.

E.I. literally makes people allergic to the world, because damaged immune systems can't deal with the chemicals in everyday products. All personal care products, car fumes, smoke of any kind, carpets, synthetic clothes, all cleansers and laundry products as well as most foods head the list. Severely E.I. people can't leave their homes and/ or let others into them. Some even need to strip their homes of everything but a few cooking utensils, a porcelain bed with cotton blankets making up the mattress, a few cotton clothes, and safe drinking water. They don't open their windows or doors as the air makes them seriously ill. Chronic Fatigue symptoms can include cellular exhaustion, debilitating weakness, neurological problems, muscle and joint pain, sore throats, sore lymph glands, night sweats, headaches you wouldn't believe, poor memory, lack of concentration and other thinking problems, as well as severe depression. Damanged immune systems leave the body vulnerable, thus most of us also have other types of auto-immune and viral illnesses, such as candida and thyroiditis.

There are other immune system illnesses that are devastating to Lesbians, such as lupus, M.S., arthritis, cancer. I've concentrated on E.I. and Chronic Fatigue as they tend to be disregarded by both society at large and the dyke community as not "real" illnesses. Since we're not viewed as "really" ill, in turn we're not offered the same support on all levels that people with "believable" illnesses receive.

Step one is to educate yourself. There are numerous articles, newsletters and books on these illnesses. Listen to what we tell you these illnesses are about and what we say we need around them. Those with E.I. and Chronic Fatigue are often told it's "all in their heads" by doctors. We don't need to hear this from you as well. Realize that both E.I. and Chronic Fatigue vary widely in their effects and just because you've known a womon with these illnesses doesn't mean you know what it's like for the next womon. One womon assured me I'd get well from Chronic Fatigue because her friend did after having it for a year and a half. Telling her I've had it for six years, and that most of us who have it more than two years don't recover, didn't move her from her conviction. Don't make assumptions about these illnesses, ask us what we need, listen when we tell you!

Step two is to make your individual self and the dyke community accessible to us. And this takes work! We need dykes willing to change their personal care products to ones we can tolerate (called "safe" products) so that you can come into our homes as friends, lovers, attendants, doctors, acupuncturists, etc. I know many homebound womyn with no one willing to use safe products. I'm lucky, I have my E.I. dyke support group that meets at my home, my lover and one friend who use safe products. When you tell us you just can't give up your mousse or fabric softener or you just have to have brand X for your face, you're telling us a product is more important

to you in your life than we are.

Smoke, perfume and other scented products (including chapstick and gum), carpets, cleaning products, animals etc. keep us from your homes and social events as surely as stairs would keep out a wheelchair-bound dyke. Realize that E.I. dykes are everywhere, some of us try to go all the places you go: the bank, grocery store, doctor's office, library, concerts, the local dyke hang-out. Your herbal scented oil, hand lotion, laundry soap or styling gel may be making us sick. If we don't say anything, it doesn't mean we aren't affected. It's difficult to constantly be confronting people about their toxic products; those products have already made us ill and many people react with

hostility. If we do tell you, don't deny our reality by saying you have "nothing" on. The natural oil you used yesterday, your hair conditioner, or the liniment for your pulled muscle may be the "nothing" causing headaches, nausea, muscle weakness, breathing difficulties or dozens of other symptoms. We need you not to argue with us, we don't go telling people they're making us sick because we have nothing else to do with our time.

We get tired of doing all the work. If a womon indicates you're making her sick, ask if she needs you to move away, and how far. If you're at her home, offer to shower with safe products. If you smoke, be aware that smoke is highly toxic and more and more people are becoming sensitive to it. Smoking in public keeps those who can't tolerate smoke out of public places. If you do smoke in public, be responsive to requests to put your cigarette pipe, cigar, out. Moving away from us doesn't help, smoke travels. Many E.I.'s will react to the aura of smoke around you even if you're not smoking in their presence. Showering or bathing with safe products, putting on fresh clothes laundered in safe laundry products and not smoking afterwards can make you safe for many E.I.s.

If you are friends, in a group or co-workers, ask what she needs in order to be around you. Offer to use safe products, wear cotton clothes, put the cat out, vacuum before she comes, or whatever will make you, your group, the workplace, accessible. Confusion is one of the many brain reactions E.I. people have to toxins. If she isn't able to answer you right away, talk with her later.

Plan parties, workshops, conferences, events so they'll be accessible — invite us and ask us how. All ads should state that there will be no smoking, and request no scented products. Air purifiers may help. Print a phone number for access information on all ads — we may not try to come if we can't find out how accessible an event is in advance.

Think of creative ways for womyn to be part of your group whether they have these illnesses mildly or severely. A womon with mild Chronic Fatigue may be able to attend a meeting but may need to lie down, or have the meeting be short. Homebound womyn may need other alternatives: participating by mail or on tape, having womyn agree to make themselves safe to be in her home, using speaker phone systems. Start asking around among your own friends. I'm sure you'll find disabled Lesbians needing your kind of group, whatever it is.

Step three is: give us the same kind of support you give AIDS. If you do grief work for AIDS patients, do it for us. We're in continual pain over the loss of our bodies, our loss of functioning, our isolation. If you donate time to an AIDS organization, at least donate an equal amount of time to a dyke with an immune system illness. We don't have care giver groups set up to come in and wash our dishes, clean our houses, take us to the doctor, do our laundry, go shopping and fix meals. Not all of us are on SSI and/or have attendants. Those who have attendants are usually in need of much more extra help. If you have a skill such as massage, acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractry, etc. and you're thinking of donating it to AIDS patients, give it to a dyke instead. Since many of us are homebound, be willing to come to our homes. If you give money to any types of AIDS organizations, give it to an ill Lesbian instead. If you give activist time to AIDS political groups or causes, give it to groups dealing with these immune system illnesses that affect mainly womyn. You may even have to start your own. These "women's illnesses" haven't seen any influx of big bucks for support services or research.

Accessibility requests from womyn with other types of disabilities don't usually require personal changes from dykes. Ramps, grab bars, ASL, braille, don't require womyn to make changes in their personal habits. The changes we ask for are not options for us any more than ramps are options for womyn in wheelchairs. Lesbians with E.I. and Chronic Fatigue often end up totally isolated, viewed as either "crazy," or controlling and manipulative. These illnesses are seen as too much of a problem, we ask for too much, we're too much hassle. We ask for changes for the same reason womyn in chairs or deaf or blind womyn ask for changes: so that we can all be part of the

community.



Jean at the Gala etching Barbara Johnson (#35, 1988)

class

(to white feminists of class privilege)

I move among you as though i belong i have matched my vocabulary to our mutual skin color

you lay out your assumptions
like cushions for me
but for me to recline on the comfort of your memories
is a lie betraying all the broken springs
of my past

for all my years in your movement i have held closely guarded in my breast pocket what is too heavy for my heart to carry

> a treasure of strength and pain an embarrassment a perverse pride

the memory of poverty

dinner for nine from a box of corn flakes sleep sought on a mattress atop an old bureau

my mother's smile
a straining of muscle
threatens to crack tissue and bone pulled
ever downward
by the anvil-weight
of weariness

you brew your collective goals and pass the cup to me

how can i share your dreams tepid though they are they would steep away my rough edges leaving a shell polished to reflect your own but we do not mirror reciprocally

as a child you slept on linens laundered by my mother your discards even were too fine for me to wear

while you cultivated a shuddered response to the words shit and vomit i cleaned up their realities

at what point do our lives touch

how will we survive the crossing

my coarseness will scar you as your smoothness has wounded me

courage will be required of you not as of a cloak but as of a nakedness if you will know my life

but hear this

less courage than i've needed to live it

i will move among you and belong to myself.

We Come From Iowa

Nigger lover
no
lover of a man
the color of maple
lover of babies
babies to be the color of
wet sand
peach trees
in the summer
ripened firm — born bruised
marked
for the dual

mama is german english my coarse locks twisted like so much corn silk african

mama breathes her breasts filling the air over and over she does not throw the tomatoes rotting on the sill at this boy who came across the fence marched about the yard shook our hearts with nigger lover nigger lover breeder of mongrels traitor traitor she does not caress or hold me cringing child at the window

places her hand
on my crown — a cloud
maybe sifting
first direct rays
her touch is a shaky shelter
the light funnelling love
her back
bends but does not snap
her raw country hand
coarse like my hair

Mama. Mama was soft boobs, tummy and thighs. Green eyes flecked with amber. I know what it is to be held with those eyes, in the cushion of her lap. When I was an infant, she played peek-a-boo and Dinah Washington for me, rocking me in that old, creaking chair. Swam at my side at two, her strength holding up my ribs against the pull of the water. Sung the alphabet song for me at three. And at the park with the caves and the muddy water for canoes, we ran hand-inhand through fields of milkweed and dandelions. When I was five, she sent me off to school. Once in the car, the second time walking, the third time with a black and white map of streets that looked like rivers and stick houses I would recognize. "Here's the pretty purple house — remember it? And look, I drew the house where that nasty dog lives. You know, the one that barks every time we go by. Are you scared to go by yourself? No? Good. Good girl."

It was here in the surrounding of white children and teachers that she allowed me to roll off her palms and into the earth. With fear etched in her forehead, she prayed I would survive the briar patch into which Daddy had taken us, considering a white education a rose garden. Mama saw the stares of the children as she left me in the hands of yet one more white teacher. She imagined the long quills I pulled out of my sides daily, but feeling powerless to alter my predicament, she let me become strong in the flappings of the wind. Mama was resigned to save herself the full agony of a woman who regrets

bringing babies into a cruel, divided world.

That relationship between me and Mama? Anger. Anger at her for being powerless. Leaving me. The children flipping my dresses to see if the brandy color that started at my knees rose to my stomach. Anger at her for being helpless. Leaving me no space for breathing inside a smile or outright giggle. Not knowing how to stop two grown folks from bouncing my Cheerios onto the waxed tiles of the kitchen floor.

Acting like they didn't see me sitting in the middle of the long veneer slick table backed into the wall. So I imagined myself absent from the room and ceased to cringe from the solid whacks of maple strong hands against wilting birch. Stomach constipated with screams, teeth and balled fists to come between them. And tears. Tears for myself. The self that feels powerless in her own presence, unable to make room, stop the anger of hands that wrecked Scooby Doo mornings. I blamed Mama for handing me this stacked tray of nothingness. It was her fault. She wore the guilty face. And I punished her with an invisible game of tug-of-war, controlling the tension of love and hate. Pulling on the rope from her stomach.

It's been awhile. Momma and Daddy have been going their separate ways for over fifteen years now. And me? Growing older, mostly. Now Mom kneads my naked muscles rubbed with oil. Allbody-health-practitioner is what they call masseuses in California. Then again, we come from Iowa. She came west seeking freedom from that boy who grew into the men and women who continued to call her nigger lover — because of her brown children. They would not take her back since she'd been under the water and walked around on the other side. And I came to California looking for her. My mama. I'd grown into the shape of that rope. Pulled along by its strangle hold strength. Stretched tautly between the choices: Black/ White. Good/Evil. Truth/Lies. Mother/Father. When I was twelve, my Grandma J. told me: "You a well-developed, wavy-haired, black & white mixed colored girl from the other side of town. That ain't ugly or cute; it's just who you is." I'm still a well-developed-wavy-hairedblack-&-white-mixed-colored-girl. That's just who I am. There is no choice. I finally found the power waiting for me in all of those words. It came to me about the time I realized my limbs would not unfold without a rip or crack, and I took myself back into the kitchen, slithered beneath the veneer slick table still vivid in my mind, groped my way to the corner leg. There I rocked into my knees, softening my fragile frame into a fetus. The tears that were sand lodged in my throat seeped into my eyes. I heard the stifled sniffles of my mother in the other room and quietly I whimpered: "Mama. Mama. Mama. Mama. ..."

"Mama. I love women."

You know, the way you love a community of women which ain't just gay/lesbian/dyke/bulldagger or some other *one-more-definition-word*. I love a world of women. I especially love the one who looks for

my smile coming around the corner, up out of my heart. But this isn't a love poem for my woman. Not the woman whose breast I hold when we sleep, always on the same side of the bed, always tucked in. She fits me. It's a love poem for Mama. Who knew that my loving women is about loving myself enough to fill my tray. The one she handed me with trembling fingers and silence. A platter of women made of hugs to hold me. Made of gold, really. Women. A woman. Whose back bends with my swaying, but does not break. Whose hands are coarse like my hair.



self-portrait Anne Mi Ok Bruining (#40, 1990)

Don't Call Me Crazy

What do you mean when you call me "crazy?" That what I do makes no sense to you? Then you mean you don't understand something. That's a statement about you, not me. Why do you try to make it sound like you're saying something about me? Why blame me for your limitation?

Do you mean you're scared of me? Do you mean you don't trust me? Then why don't you say so instead of hanging a label on me? If I've done something that makes you scared or distrustful, then you can say so outright. Or is it that I haven't done anything? Are you reacting only to the labels you've heard others use about me?

I took the labels seriously once, before I learned some history. The medical profession made them up, the same medical profession that got its start in Europe by burning nine million traditional healers as witches; that made death in childbirth commonplace by delivering babies with unwashed hands; that keeps going by cutting the wombs and breasts from women both sick and healthy; that helped the Nazis by declaring psychiatric inmates and physically or intellectually disabled people to be candidates for extermination—before going on to "diagnose" the "disease" of Jewishness. It has found many ways to declare Lesbianism and homosexuality diseases, and heterosexuality a treatment. Why should I trust these casual killers to define a mind as "sick" or "healthy?" Why should you?

Are you really in a position to judge the quality of my mind? I'm free to define myself as "mentally disabled" if I choose, but no one else can define that for me. In fact, I don't think I am mentally disabled. I have mental abilities others lack. Plenty of social disabilities have been created around this. In some cultures, it's not safe to advertise oneself as a visionary.

And even if I sometimes act or feel in ways I don't understand myself, does that make me different from everyone else? If I act or feel ways I don't like and can't control, don't you think I feel scared and ashamed enough without your judgements? Do you think it helps me when you casually dismiss me as meaningless or useless? Or do you think it helps you? Does it get you out of having to face my particular problems along with your own? Does it give you an excuse to ignore

or discount anything I say in the future? What good do you think it does you to call me Crazy, Psychotic, Wacko, Borderline, Emotionally Disturbed, Bananas, Insane, Nuts, Clinical, Schizophrenic, Sick, Manic-Depressive, Mentally Ill or any other cutesy or professionalized insult? Even if you think it does you some good, it doesn't do me any.

I've been locked up plenty of times because some people didn't trust me free. For reasons of their own, they didn't like how I dress, how I talk, how I show feelings, who and what I like sexually, who I think should run the country, who I think does run it. I've been locked up for lots of things that aren't supposed to be crimes in a free country. The only excuse ever given was a list of long, latinized words that mean"crazy." Are you saying I should be locked up? Forcibly addicted to dangerous drugs? Electroshocked? Lobotomized? Those are the punishments for being labelled "crazy." I don't think you mean those things because I doubt you think about them. But I do.

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Therapism and the Taming of the Lesbian Community¹

Introduction

Therapism is not a word you'd probably find in the average Lesbian's vocabulary.² But oh, how it permeates our communities. Therapism overtakes a community when too many of its members undergo therapy. Actually in this day and age therapism is like herpes — all you need do is rub up against it a little and you've got it. Although preferred, no personal experience with therapy is required. Since so many Lesbians have turned to therapy, those of us who haven't are also influenced by the behaviors therapy teaches. So therapism is more than just the behaviors learned by women who have undergone therapy. It has become the standard of behavior by which our community judges all of its members.

Therapism emphasizes feeling — having and expressing feelings. Because of this focus on emotions, therapism encourages nurturing, tact and acceptance — all traditionally feminine ways to behave. According to stereotype, women are the emotional gender and men are the rational gender. There are several common ways that oppressed people fight stereotypes. The way therapism has adopted is to say, "So what if we're emotional. Emotional is the best way to be, and you're just jealous. Womanhood is superior. Worship the goddess. Revel in your menstrual blood. Glorify your emotions." Now our community embraces these stereotypes with a zest. This makes me

more than just a little suspicious.

Standards of Behavior

It is important to point out that therapism does not necessarily equal therapy. Perhaps the goal of therapy is for us to be more honest about our emotions, for us to learn that it's OK to feel certain emotions that we've been conditioned not to feel (e.g., anger, pride, etc.). This may even be a good idea in certain situations. Whatever the goals of therapy, therapism is the resulting doctrine in our community. And therapism says you *must* feel — usually at the expense of

^{1.} I'd like to thank Tara Ayres, Lori Saxe and Edie Dixon for their thoughtful comments and ever stimulating conversations.

^{2.} Janice G. Raymond, A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 155-160.

rational thought. There is an entire set of standards of behavior that follows this basic premise. Of course these standards were not devised by some devious Lesbian who wanted to harm the community. They are an attempt to establish ethical ways of dealing with one another. Unfortunately they have been far from successful.

I have said that therapism requires you to feel. I know this because everyone is always saying how they feel. "When you interupt me, I feel as if you aren't listening to me." "When you raise your voice, I feel

frightened." "When you are late, I feel you don't care."

I find it redundant for someone to continually use the phrase I feel as a disclaimer before every opinion. Why say, "I feel you don't understand," rather than, "You don't understand?" I've never credited anyone with infallibility. When you continually use these disclaimers, I feel insulted. (That's a little therapy joke.) Or, equally annoying, I think you're a self-effacing wimp. And, believe it or not, when you say, "I feel you don't understand," some of us hear you call us "stupid" anyway. For all your attempt at tact, there are those of us who are good translators and don't buy the sweet talk.

This *I feel* language encourages us to judge everything by how it makes us feel. If we go to a lecture or read an article on some political topic, therapism encourages responses such as, "The author seemed very hostile to me," or "She made me feel very frightened." Rather than encouraging us to evaluate the substance, therapism encourages us to examine how her words made us *feel*. This promotes a microscopic view. It encourages us to look at most events in terms of one

person's behavior affecting another person's emotions.

Of course, once one has recognized and expressed how she feels, process begins. After all, you have made yourself vulnerable by sharing your emotions. It would be cruel for the other person not to reciprocate. Process becomes the means by which women either singularly or together dissect their feelings surrounding an incident. I recall the first time a woman explained to me that the process of getting there was just as important as reaching the goal. I agree with this idea. It is important to be ethical in the means we use to achieve our ends. It is also important to recognize that we learn things in the struggle along the way. But today, we frequently process ourselves to a standstill. Process now *is* the goal.

Friendship

In the good old days — pre-therapism — friendships were made in a variety of ways and were various in nature. We spent endless hours exchanging opinions, brainstorming ideas and telling life stories. During that era, bad times were the exception, not the rule. We knew that friends were there for us in times of crisis just as they were there in good times and even in boring times. This knowledge assisted in getting us through bad times. And we were further assisted by knowing that our friends would *not* be there if the crisis went on indefinitely. We expected that our friends would overcome their problems in a reasonable period of time. In other words, our friendships were based on the belief that we were strong. And, because we assumed we were strong, we also assumed that we could triumph over difficult situations.

Therapism teaches us quite a different way to be friends. In the first place, one must take one's problems to a therapist so as not to overburden one's friends. If one doesn't have any friends, one doesn't have to make any. Once in therapy, women come back to their friends with a whole different set of expectations. Now we hear a lot about "getting needs met." We hear ad nauseam how our actions make our friends feel. Friends don't ask friends for advice. They have their therapists for that. Friends ask friends to take care of them, not to advise them. Friendship is now based on the assumption that we are weak rather than that we are strong. Instead of being a delightfully varied experience, friendship now consists almost entirely of nurturing or being nurtured.

And let us not forget about "safe space." A major problem with these therapistic means of communicating is that they can be so damn manipulative. "Safe space" is perhaps the biggest manipulator. At one time safe space for Lesbians meant space where we could show affection for each other without fear of heckling or verbal abuse. It meant space where we could dare to look like Dykes without fear of physical assault. This kind of safe space was particularly important to working class Lesbians and Lesbians of color who did not enjoy the relative safety that academic communities offered white Lesbians.3 However, today the term "safe space" indicates something entirely different. It means safety from each other. As far as I can tell, "safe space" is now an environment where a woman can express her emotions or feelings without fear of criticism. Safe space is a good example of how therapism has taken away our ability to discern the appropriate application of political ideas - sometimes popularizing these ideas past the point of significant meaning.

Conversation with Tara Ayres

Political Ramifications

Let's talk politics. Politically speaking, what has therapism done to the Lesbian Community? Do you remember what the expression the personal is political originally meant? It meant that all those small, personal day-to-day things we did had political impact. Where we lived, who our friends were, where we worked and how we spent our money were all political choices whether we liked it or not. Now it means that working on personal problems equals political activism. The more time you spend giving or taking support or nurturing, the more politically groovy you are. As a result our community has become politically immobile.

When a lesbian judges everything in terms of how it makes her feel, she becomes very emotionally vulnerable. She cannot take a bold stand on anything for fear of being criticized. Or she cannot criticize for fear that the community will disown her. Although support and safety have always been important to us, our community used to be based on movement. Now, we are so "safe" we cannot move.

Therapism has taught us to find everything equally upsetting. I see Lesbians respond to minor disagreements with other women as if they'd been raped. How did we lose our perspective? We are so emotionally vulnerable that we cannot distinguish between a philosophical difference and a physical assault. Lesbians seem to be spending most of their time being upset with each other rather than recognizing and fighting the real enemies: male dominance and violence.

Therapism also tells us that we cannot trust our intellects because they have been corrupted by male-dominated society. We must trust our "natural" feelings because they are our essence as females. What makes us think our emotions have not been equally corrupted by male culture? I want to use all of my abilities. It is certainly true that while we remain emotionally vulnerable, refusing to use our intellects, fighting among ourselves in our safe space, we pose absolutely

no threat to our oppressors.

Therapism teaches us to make our actions consistent with our feelings. No longer do we try to make our actions consistent with our beliefs. One example is the Lesbian baby boom. I refer, of course, to the explosion of Lesbian motherhood we've been experiencing lately. I can see several problems that make this baby boom politically unwise for us. Yet there is an appaling lack of discussion in our communites about the politics of having children. Remember, Lesbian motherhood "feels right." And safe space means no criticism of feelings.

Therapism has encouraged us to do what "feels right" to the exclusion of political analysis. As a result our community is tolerating

behaviors we used to find abhorrent. The resurgence of butch/femme and sadomasochistic activities are good examples. Women who demand the right to play butch/femme and/or sadomasochistic roles because it feels right are failing to accept responsibility for the larger political ramifications of their personal actions ... a perfect example of therapism's approach to the *personal is political*.

Support Groups & AA

Many Lesbian mothers are forming support groups, as are Lesbian incest survivors, Lesbian adult children of alcoholics, Lesbians battered by Lesbian partners and on and on. If it begins to sound like a list of victims, it's no wonder.

The support group is a direct manifestation of therapism in our communities. Where we once formed CR (Consciousness Raising) groups, we now have support groups. The difference between the two types of groups is striking. The goal of the CR group was to raise our awareness of our oppression so that we could fight it. The goal of the support group is to band women together to take care of one another. Although they may claim differently, one can see that the majority of women in support groups spend most of their time nurturing one another. Perhaps the original intent of the support group was to give women the strength to overcome their specific hardship. However, I see little of the overcoming or moving on to action. Support groups have become self-perpetuating systems of dependency, once again encouraging weakness rather than strength.

A good example of the support group phenomenon in our community is Alcoholics Anonymous. Certainly no one can deny the importance of Lesbians overcoming drug and alcohol dependencies. Still, the method one uses to overcome these dependencies is important. AA, like many other therapistic ideas our community has adopted, escapes with

amazingly little examination. I think it's time we had a look.

A concept fundamental to AA is that of alcoholism as a disease. The first of the twelve steps proclaims the alcoholic's inability to control her drinking. Like other manifestations of therapism, AA once again teaches us that we are weak, that we are victims of something beyond our own control. For Lesbians to believe that we have no control over selected personal behaviors is political suicide. In order to overcome our oppression it is vital to recognize and believe in our own individual strength. Most of us have heard

Alcoholics Anonymous, third edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), p. 59.

the idea that to be truly strong one must know when to be weak. This paradox is very misleading. Yet it is a basic concept for AA people. Alcoholics Anonymous promotes the idea of strength through weakness in its insistence on a "Higher Power."

AA stresses the idea that its members can believe in God in whatever form God might take to them. For example, Lesbians are free to believe in the Goddess rather than God. On the surface this sounds very open-minded. However, there is no hiding the fact that AA wants its members to believe in an all-powerful, external deity. Those of us who believe that we are the goddess and that the only deity in existence is the one within ourselves are shit out of luck. AA material is full of submissive suggestions like #7 of the twelve steps, "Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings." Needless to say, I find this spiritual advice to be questionable. This further insures the timidity and passivity of those Lesbians involved with AA.

Quite frankly, AA solves the problem of alcohol dependency by replacing it with a dependency of another sort. In order to overcome alcohol abuse one must depend on a "Higher Power." Additionally AA makes its members dependent on the AA group. Frequent attendance of meetings is expected of members lest they start to drink again. As long as AA convinces its members that one drink will do them in, they will cling to the group out of fear of their own fragility.

The bottom line is that AA doesn't offer any real improvement for our community. In that it may offer sobriety, it might well benefit some individual Lesbians. But the ideal solution to Lesbian chemical dependency would benefit both the individual and the community. As long as we remain convinced that the AA method is the most successful one, we will not look for a better way. By encouraging weakness that needs continual support rather than strength that enables us to move on to other things, AA contributes to our oppression. Rather than looking at AA as a temporary solution until a better one can be found, our community is now using 12-step programs for all kinds of things including drug addiction, eating disorders and "loving too much."

Lesbian Spirituality

Although AA clearly teaches a Christian spirituality, therapism in the Lesbian Community really teaches more of the pagan beliefs. A combination of Dianic Wicca, Eastern Philosophy and "new age" spirituality seems to be popular today. However, both the AA spirituality and the more popular "Woman's Spirituality" teach helpless-

^{5.} Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 59.

ness. Many of you will sit up at this point and loudly object. Woman's Spirituality claims to teach strength. But this claim can be deceptive.

Those of you who have been in therapy recently or have observed your friends go through it (just about all of us) have witnessed how many therapists are into Woman's Spirituality. You need not shop around much to find therapists who'll guide you through creative visualization, teach you self hypnosis and meditation, clear your aura and clean your chakras. There are even therapists who've started ritual groups.

But once again there has been little political analysis of this phenomenon. At first glance one sees the idea of powerfulness. We are told we can create our own reality in a very tangible way. Light a candle, say your words of power and that new job, new car, new lover can be yours. But with power comes endless personal responsibility. So Woman's Spirituality teaches the threefold law which basically says that whatever you do comes back to you threefold. This leads us to another concept common to Woman's Spirituality, karma. Karma is sort of tied into the threefold law but approaches it backwards. Since everything you do comes back to you threefold, it only follows that whatever happens to you is the result of something you did previously. You are responsible for everything that happens to you. It is no wonder that most Lesbians I've known who are into Woman's Spirituality are amazingly passive — particularly when it comes to political action. According to karma, a woman who has been raped has no one to blame but herself. Furthermore, the threefold law teaches us to leave known rapists alone. Any harm we do them will only hurt our karma. And the rapist will eventually "get his" threefold some time later anyway (if not in this life, in a future life). These beliefs are almost identical to what our male-dominated, Christian society has been telling us for years. Women are responsible for the abuse they suffer at men's hands. Bad things will happen to women who try to hold men responsible. If this is teaching Lesbians to be powerful, I fail to see it.

As a woman who believes much of what Dianic Wicca has to teach, I am appalled at the transformation of this information within a therapistic community. It once seemed logical to me that radical politics and Dianic Wicca would go hand in hand. But my experience with the women of my community has been quite the opposite. Those Lesbians who are into Witchcraft usually claim not to be very political (and believe me, they're not). Furthermore, most Dykes I know with radical politics (and granted they are fewer these days) find Lesbian Witchcraft to be a joke. Therapism has caused this schism. So it is not until we solve the problems of therapism in our communities that our spirituality will find our activism again.

Conclusion

It becomes very clear as we analyze further what's going on in our community that therapism is doing us harm. It has taught us that we are basically fragile and weak. The language of therapism is full of talk about empowering or enabling because we assume that on a personal level we don't have power to begin with. True, as an oppressed group, Lesbians lack significant political power. However, therapism doesn't address Lesbians as an oppressed group. It addresses us as individuals. And it tells us that as individuals we need to have personal power because we ain't got it to begin with. In addition, therapism teaches us to judge everything in terms of how it makes us feel emotionally. It tells us that friendship and caring must be expressed primarily through nurturing. It teaches us to be tolerant, passive and apolitical.

I remember one day when I was very young my grandmother explained to me her amusement over the corruption of the word square. Calling someone a square was to ridicule that person for being too conservative, too cautious, too old-fashioned. But when my grandmother was a child, calling someone a square was a compliment. It meant the person was well-rounded, balanced and level-headed. As individuals, we need to become more square in my grandmother's sense of the word. As squares we'd take for granted that we are innately strong. We'd start dealin with specific political topics once again rather than just vague personal "issues." We'd start to "empower" ourselves in more tangible ways like owning more women's businesses or thwarting rapists rather than simply solving individual emotional upsets. As squares we'd have less therapy and more friendship. Our friendships would consist of excited philosophical discussions and work on common projects as well as support during difficult times. Our friends would challenge us as well as listen to our troubles. And as friends we would show each other what it means to be strong individuals committed to being a community of Lesbians.

Note: this essay was substantially edited when it first appeared. The full manuscript is available from the author. Send SASE to Joan Ward c/o Sinister Wisdom.

from Money Changes Everything

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zana (#28, 1985)

from The Spread of Consumerism: Good Buy Community

Many years ago I lived in a Feminist Collective based upon, among other things, a shared value of resistance to Consumerism: the attitude that everything can be bought or used. In the past several years my focus has changed to building Lesbian connections, hence, strong Lesbian Community. I believe that our passion for each other is what fuels our connections. I believe that in making Lesbian connections we have the ability to create and transform ourselves and our world.

In writing this paper I am not so much concerned with what we buy, but with what male values are used to form our perception of ourselves as consumers of our communities rather than co-creators of our communities. It is my intent to blend my old analysis of consumer values with my current Dyke Separatist perspective in order to sensitize myself and other Dykes to the effects of consumer values on our Lesbian communities and Women-only space.

We live in a culture that is built upon consuming. In order to convince us that we have to buy, own, use, (consume), it is necessary to create a context in which conspicuous consumption looks normal. One way to develop that context is to create "needs" and then to objectify living things, processes and interactions into "products" to fill these "man-made needs." As in other systems of reality, if one views the world in this way, it then spills over to include how we view the environment, animals, people and our relationship to them.

What does it mean when we adopt a value that allows such mass-scale objectification? Objects have no inherent meaning. For instance, an automobile has different meanings related to which culture, class and economic group you belong. Buying an object in order to foster identity becomes a never-ending cycle. Because objects have no intrinsic value, the status and identity do not become firmly established, so we have to continue to "consume" other objects to shore up our identity, and so the consumer cycle goes on ad infinitum. This process works to help create a consumer atmosphere because it is an escalation-based model.

The "habit of escalation" creates a context in which we willingly participate in or at least accept increasingly destructive behaviors without questioning them. This objectifying of people and experiences soon leads to being jaded. We need more and more stimulation

in order to respond at all. Numbness leads to a focus on newness so that we might find that extra stimulation. To focus on newness is to focus on packaging, not on content. Since newness becomes more and more difficult to create, then things must be packaged to provide the illusion of newness....

An example of focus on the new is the encroachment by men on Women-only space. A purported Lesbian musician at a major women's music event in California, while introducing the boys in her band, was reported to have said "how nice it is to be able to have boys back on stage with us again." Men have "been on the stage" with us for 5,000 years. Nothing much about their behavior has changed in the last 15 years, but now they market themselves to us as "new, improved feminist" men. Ten years ago boys would not have been permitted on stage without a lot of discussion of the political implications of male invasion of Women-only space. Ten years ago the personal was political. In 1988 we have reduced the political to the personal.*

For Dyke communities the search for newness and the resulting alienation has meant that the commitment to analyze our lives, our behaviors and problems in political terms is no longer promoted or supported. In the seventies we had a commitment to analyzing our lives from a political perspective, and we joined Consciousness Raising groups to that end. By the eighties, many Dykes had retreated to therapies and various twelve-step groups, none of which are noted for any political analyses, but are heavily invested in viewing the world from a psychological base. Psychology complements consumerism nicely, in that it views humans as units that can be adjusted to the norm. All we have to do to get healthy is to work our program better, try a different therapy, or subject ourselves to an endless list of cures because we are never quite healthy enough. This also is an example of an escalation-based model.

The undermining of our political skills further endangers us in that the boys are able to divert our focus to their concerns and tasks, at the same time convincing us that they are our concerns and interests. Much theory and discussion has centered around motherhood. Many Lesbians understood motherhood to be fundamentally oppressive to women and Lesbians, and understood that the boys benefited from us producing children to turn over to the heteropatriarchy. Perhaps some commu-

^{*} A point made by Better Tallen in a conversation concerning the lack of political analysis in our communities.

nities are just now beginning to realize that the children raised by Lesbians are not significantly different than the children raised by heterosexual parents. The fact remains that children of Lesbians are claimed at the same level by the heteropatriarchy as children of heterosexual parents.

Boys' culture is in no way diminished by our consumption of that culture; in fact, it contributes to its continuation. Our Lesbian cultural heritage has been that music, art and theory have been used as the means by which we created, expressed and explored our connections with each other. If our commitment is to building Lesbian community, we must participate in the ongoing creation of that community, not the objectification and consumption of Lesbian community.

I question the inverse correlation between the rise of cultural Lesbianism and the return to the malestream and resulting decline in respect for the Radical Lesbian activities. When we enact consumer values, our consumer-producer connections are the priority. When we create Lesbian community, we are enacting values that enhance and prioritize our Dyke connections. A fundamental difference between Lesbian culture and heteropatriarchal culture is that unlike the boys, what moves and sustains us are our desires and passion. Our passion for our friends, our lovers, our politics, our lives and our creations defines our connections. Passion and desire cannot live in the marketplace any more than we can joyously thrive in the heteropatriarchal world. I believe our passion has integrity and rather than allow itself to be distorted by consumerist interactions, it will quietly leave. When consumerism forces passion to leave our interactions, we no longer have a basis for Lesbian connections. It is this interweaving of passion and desire throughout our values, our lives and our connections that will be the foundation of our Dyke communities.

This is a revised [and highly edited] version of the paper presented at the Lesbian Theory panel, June 1988, at the National Women's Studies Association conference. I want to thank Sarah Hoagland for asking me to participate in the Lesbian Theory panel of NWSA. The panel was the impetus for me finally setting my thoughts down on paper. I want to thank Julia Penelope for the creation of the word heteropatriarchy and Anna Lee for the word malestream. I want to thank Anna Lee, Bette Tallen, Ellen Catlin and Laura Sanders for their help in clarifying my ideas and rewriting the paper. I am also indebted to long hours of conversations with many of the Separatists who attended the Midwest Lesbian Separatist Conference, June 1988.

Christina Springer (#42, 1990)

Wishlist

for my sisters who think process is permanent

Want you to be fierce virtuous in presence righteous in thought imperious in spirit.

Want you to be nappy, kinky, out of control

& threatening.

Want Rocky Mountain competing with the skyline laughter.

Want rumpled up / needs ironing tossed out of the laundry basket landing in the corner for a week smile.

Want harvest moon cloud passing over swaying with the wind butt.

Want climb a coconut tree in Barbados during early-morning sunrise rain for five minutes breasts.

Want a kneel down, genuflect with nothing on my conscience about to receive communion body.

Want you dancing Manjani in all of its ancient gloriousness on the last nerves of the Missus Clairols, TCBs, Revlons and Posners.

Want your hair permanent and your emotions turning back consistently.

Want to roll over beg Medusa turn me to stone for always pestering her in want.

Want soft nappy kinks springing comfortable control in gnarled wise youness.

Want you looking dredful frightening and untamed.

Want warrior & woman simultaneously. Want truthful honesty in spirit Want a mirror of yourself learning in love.



"there is a window of joy that has your face in it"

(from "As Love Is A House" by Lisa Carlin)

photo by Jasmine Marah (#38, 1989)

One Way to Read our Herstory: Selections from the Editors' "Notes for a Magazine" and "Introductions" from Sinister Wisdom #1 through #42

from Notes for a Magazine, SW #1 (1976)
Catherine Nicholson & Harriet (Desmoines) Ellenberger:

We're lesbians living in the South. We're white; sometimes unemployed, sometimes working part-time. We're a generation apart.

Catherine directed university plays for twenty years until the spring she pasted on her office door: "You are a witch by saying aloud, 'I am a Witch,' three times, and thinking about that. You are a witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal."

I was an erratic activist in the civil rights movement, the Left, and then the radical feminist women's movement. During the same ten years I was first a student, competing my way into the professional classes, and then a wife/stepmother, having settled on marrying in.

Between us we span the political/cultural abyss. Catherine is vulnerable to criticism from writers, artists and heads of English departments. I'm vulnerable to all criticisms couched in Marxist terminology. We're both quick to perceive or imagine slights on our motives or abilities.

So why take chances? Because we needed MORE to read on, to feed on, more writing to satisfy our greedy maws. We'd become lesbian separatists because no other political position satisfied. But that left us with scattered beginnings of a culture and no visible strategy. We believed with the CLIT papers that consciousness is women's greatest strength, and we both responded strongly to Mary Daly's call for "luddic cerebration, the free play of intuition in our space, giving rise to thinking that is vigorous, informed, multidimensional, independent, creative, tough." But how to think that keenly and imaginatively, how to develop that consciousness?

We knew how far we'd come with each other. We'd given each other the strength to let go of illusory "safe places," those toeholds the patriarchy offers women who deny themselves and other women. We'd talked and talked and set fire to each other's imaginations until, with the help of other lesbians, we were spinning visions and digging more and more deeply at the roots of our experience as boundary dwellers. Thinking about our past together, we decided to do with

numbers of women what we've done best with each other; we decided to extend the love affair with Sinister Wisdom.

Sinister Wisdom is also our political action. We believe that writing of a certain consciousness has greater impact when it's collected, when several voices give weight, harmony and countermelody to the individual message. The consciousness we want Sinister Wisdom to express is — briefly — that of the lesbian or lunatic who embraces her boundary/criminal status, with the aim of creating a new species in a new time/space.

We're using the remnants of our class and race privilege to construct a force that we hope will help ultimately destroy privilege.

from Notes for a Magazine II, SW #1 Catherine/Harriet:

The Title

We call our space *Sinister Wisdom* because the root meaning of "sinister" is "from the left side." The Law of the Fathers equates right-over-left, white-over-black, heterosexual-over-homosexual, and male-over-female with good-over-evil. *Sinister Wisdom* turns these patriarchal values upside down as a necessary prelude to creating our own.

The left, the genuine Left, means revolution. We choose "sinister" because we mean, we intend, revolution. Revolution that destroys the structures of oppression as we seize power over our lives.

And the left side connotes intuition, the bringing into light of all

that has lain dormant within us.

Finally, a *Sinister Wisdom* is reversal. Show the underbelly, praise the underbelly, and the beast rolls onto its back. Thereby baring its throat to the fangs of the Furies.

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from SW #2 (1976), a Special Issue: Lesbian Writing and Publishing Edited by **Beth Hodges**:

...The process of getting an issue out is as exciting as falling in love — and for the same reason, that the actuality is never exactly what one anticipated.... We believe that we are presenting a forum in the true sense: an open-ended discussion of the current questions in women's publishing and criticism.

from SW #3 (edited by Catherine and Harriet, 1977) Harriet:

We began exactly a year ago at point zero: isolation and ignorance. We decided to make a magazine because we wanted more Lesbian writing, we wanted more friends, and we wanted to express the power we felt building up inside ourselves, that was both us and not-us.

* * *

We planted a fantasy tree and with a great whoosh of wings an entire flock of Lesbian birds-of-paradise settled in its branches.

So in two hours of an afternoon early in March, we wrote, typed and pasted-up a call to "lesbians and lunatics" to submit work to a new magazine.

We had \$2000, no plans, no skills, no movement credentials, no cohorts ... I stopped nausea in its tracks by firmly believing that no one would answer the leaflet and that would be the end of *that*. It wasn't ... Letters began appearing in the mailbox.

Women have given us money, they have given us writing, they've given us graphics and help with design; they've taught us everything



Sinister Wisdom

The cover of #3 & later a fund-raising poster photo by Tee Corinne (#3, 1977)

from packing books and keeping records to using press-type; they've xeroxed leaflets and handed them out; they've collated and made PMT's; they've criticized content and criticized style and given us a kick in the pants whenever we needed it. And still it goes on. Whenever we're deciding finally to chuck it and flee the county, a letter arrives ... with ideas, gossip, encouragement. A network exists.

from SW #8 (1979) Harriet:

An issue on love? How tacky.

...We had silently agreed to stop wondering on why's and focus on how's because dreams and desires and their halting articulation in new/old words don't get a magazine out. And yet they do too, in ways we began to sense. We had both seen enough of what cynicism does to Lesbian projects, to Lesbian lives — cynicism, and the hysteria which is its other face. Going through the motions of activism, dropping out, pulling back, lapsing into the undertow of passivity and despair that sucks constantly at our feet; and the other face — the lashings out at other women, the destructive winds that blow through Lesbian groups, Lesbian "communities." We knew enough about what happens when you forget to remember why you're doing what you're doing; and we knew enough about how much easier it is to forget than to remember. And how can a woman continue to participate without knowing why, without remembering that she does it for love?... We decided ... a love issue would be the way to remember.

from SW #10 (1979), a Special Issue: On Being Old & Age Edited by Susan Leigh Star:

...The sparks for this issue began with a series of remarkable conversations about age and ageism over a period of two years with two friends, Baba and Risa. Risa came out ten years ago at the age of twelve.... That Risa could not go to a bar, the main place to meet other Lesbians at that time, for the first nine years of her activism in the Lesbian feminist movement, fills me with rage and shame. We have not chosen, for the most part, as a movement, to meet whenever possible in places accessible to young women.

Baba is almost sixty now, and we have together explored many meanings of time and age ... I moved with her from denying her age (you're not old, look at how young you think), to being awed or distanced by her age (how much experience you have, how little we

have to talk about), to envying her age (everyone listens to you, you have the force of age-authority, you've been through this already), to sharing her anger about ageism towards elder women, and accepting her age and mine as wonderfully changing, central parts of us, involving me because it is of us, because wherever two women touch, all of our complexities are relevant.

This issue encompasses many of our conversations. We talked many times of the need for images of strong Lesbian/feminist women in their nineties and eighties, strong seers who can scry for us a future, a council of heretics who can stand on the edge of multiple experience, looking forward and backward, to help us crack open our frozen present-centered sight. If we have no idea of boundary-dwelling at ninety, then we really have no idea about it now, because our lives will have an end-point, a *telos*, a linear stopping-place....

The process of editing this issue has been an extraordinary one for me: I feel oldened, enriched by it. The women whose work appears here have taught me to prefer the chaotic reality of my life to the image — to experience, as Myra Love names it, lived intensities, real age. ...

The articles, poems, photographs and graphics in this issue explore many strands of aging, age, and time. Visions of new kinds of oldness, love of the old, love of the process of becoming old, claiming the pride and wisdom of age. The bitters of age, and of youth; the way that patriarchy has fragmented our experience into a monotonously broken nonflow ... the way we have been separated from each other, stranded in our respective ages. The process of "intergenerational" sparking between Lesbians: respecting the special experience with which each era imbues us, and wanting that to be a basis for sharing and for individuation — moving from intergenerational to transgenerational to freely agenerational anarchy, where we designate what is relevant, where we leap times together, explode the continuity of history by refusing to see ourselves in terms of a "life cycle," and moving instead into a life layering, a "succession of brief, amazing movements/each one making possible the next."*

Julia Penelope and Sarah Lucia Hoagland were guest editors of SW #15 (1980), a Special Issue: Lesbianism: Sexuality and Power | The Patriarchy: Violence and Pornography. They wrote articles but no specific editors' notes for that issue.

^{*} Adrienne Rich, "From a Survivor," Diving into the Wreck (Norton, 1973).

SW #16 (1981): A Domestic History Catherine & Harriet (their last issue as editors):

I. In the Beginning — (by Catherine) 1976 — Charlotte, North Carolina

January: We are alone. We talk about *Amazon Quarterly*, now defunct, how it should not just die with no progeny, how something like it should continue; then talk ourselves into believing we could do it.

February: The "something like" AQ is named "Sinister Wisdom," a witchy phrase from Joanna Russ's The Female Man that we've fallen in love with. (One of our friends tells us that the title is gimmicky and probably won't wear well. We ignore her.) The logo comes from Jane Ellen Harrison's Prologomena to the Study of Greek Religion (p.275), a Boeotian plate painting of the Corn-goddess (Demeter and Persephone in one figure) which Catherine feels graphically represents the title. We make a flyer and send it to women and institutions whose addresses are in the New Woman's Survival Sourcebook. Also to Beth Hodges, who had done the Margins special issue on "Lesbian Feminist Writing and Publishing" (1974). Also to anyone we can think of that might be interested in contributing or subscribing.

SINSTER WISDOM

How does a woman survive when she steps out from the death procession of patriarchy? How does she think without thinking 'their' thoughts, dreaming 'their' dreams, repeating 'their' patterns? We're trying to answer the questions in our own lives and finding only hints and clues so we decided to make a space to attract other clues, other attempts at living and thinking past the patriarchy. We call our space Sinister Wisdom because the root meaning of sinister is "from the left side." The law of the Fathers equates right-over-left and white-over-black and heterosexual-over-homosexual and male-over-female with good-over-evil. We want to turn these patriarchal values upside down as a necessary prelude to creating our own.

We want to print what Mary Daly calls "Ludic cerebration, the free play of intuition in our own space, giving rise to thinking that is vigorous, informed, multidimensional, independent, creative, tough." We need thinking that comes out of the deepest parts of woman-identified experiences; thinking that is outrageous, undiluted, monstrous; thinking that exorcises the Godfathers, allowing the most devalued fragments of self to emerge undistorted by guilt and unthwarted by shame.

The consciousness *Sinister Wisdom* will express is — briefly — that of the lesbian or lunatic who embraces her boundary/criminal status with the aim of creating a new species in a new time/space. The three issues of Volume 1 will come out July 1, 1976; November 1, 1976; March 1, 1977 ... Subscription rates are \$4.50/one year ... checks payable to *Sinister Wisdom*.

March: We open a bank account in SW's name: we are a partner-ship, we legally exist. Beth stops to see us on her way north. We talk non-stop. She is encouraging; she gives us many more names and addresses. More flyers sent out. We receive a manuscript which we had solicited from Julia Stanley in South Dakota; we receive unsolicited mss. from LA, NYC, Oregon, and some exciting poems from a Susan Leigh Star in Boston.

April: Harriet is typing copy on a rented IBM Selectric; Catherine is learning to paste-up from Laurel Galana's "How to Make a Magazine" in the *AQ* anthology *The Lesbian Reader*, and looking for a printer. Find one in Clover, South Carolina—old family firm—prints a lot of Baptist Church literature—we are nervous. But Mr. G. will print a thousand copies of *SW* for \$450 if we do collating and stapling.

We say yes.

Harriet writes her "Notes for a Magazines," which announces the radical stance of SW. I am thrilled by her integrity of vision, which I share. But I'm scared to death by the bald admission that we are lesbians—that SW is devoted to the creation of a lesbian imagination, "and in all known societies lesbians are a criminal class, those who are cast out." To declare these things in print! On the other hand, announcing around, above, under, and through the truth of who we are and what we aim to do seems to me unthinkable. [As to fear and courage, I think H and I complemented each other: she was bold about stating her politics, but afraid, lacking in confidence, about our ability to actually do a magazine. Coming from a career of doing the impossible in theatre, I was more confident about the doing, but coming from a life of disguises, encoding, I was mortally afraid of telling the truth about myself and my vision.]

May: Beth stops on her way south. We ask her if we can print the second lesbian writing and publishing issue she's now planning. She agrees; it will be our second issue, scheduled for November ... Kent — close friend of a friend — offers a press — an ancient Multilith 1250, not in working order —rent-free for a year. C & H move out of their bedroom to make way for the press and an expanding SW office. Three Charlotte dykes form press collective and pledge to get the press in working order. (They never did.) C is still learning to paste-up, with Jan Millsapps and Marianne Lieberman advising her on design. We select a drawing of Marianne's for the cover: one of a Mexican woman who looks like a real Amazon, pointing to the left-hand side of the page. But because she is actually pointing right with her right hand, should we reverse the image? Do we identify with the model, or does the left-to-right reading convention dominate us? Big

dilemma. Besides, her position corresponds to that of the goddess figure in our logo ... Marianne and I drive down to Clover to show her large cover drawing to the printer. Mr. G. turns pale, asks if there will be photographs of nude women in the magazine. I assure him no — we can't afford to print photographs. Then he says he will make the cover plate himself, after working hours; "so the men and the girls in the shop won't be embarrassed." I begin to worry: what will happen when he sees the text of SW? What will happen when the term lesbian leaps from the page at the "men and the girls"? Nightmare fantasies of Mr. G and his men burning the paste-up in self-righteous revulsion, or sabotaging the job by blurring all the print or what? I'm too naive to know what atrocities can be perpetrated by press men.

...Our mailbox is beginning to fill up. Example: "Sisters, Have seen an ad about you in several places lately and the latest was L. Connection. Am very interested in carrying your publication in my small feminist bookstore—please send ordering information, including bulk rates. (Is it possible just to order 2 or 3 copies?) Thanks. (signed) Moonyean, Womanspace, Tempe, Ariz." Yes, Moonyean, it is possible, and what are bulk rates? And our phone rings a lot. Long distance from Chicago: "Hello, is this Harriet or Catherine? I'm Nancy Adair and I got your name and number from Julia Stanley..."

Dykes traveling south sleep overnight on our sun porch.

June: We deliver the copy. We are very nervous. We insist on paying \$100 in advance — I'm hoping this will somehow insure its safety: a propitiatory offering to the mercenary printers' gods or devils. The men and the girls are too busy to pay us much mind — no

one looks at our precious paste-up. Whew-!

...Three weeks later we return for the boxes of printed sheets. Mr. G has put together and stapled one copy for us. It is beautiful, it is dazzling, it is *real!* We stop at a Catawba river restaurant on the South Carolina side — so we can order a cocktail (illegal in N.C.) to toast the Lady SW. Back home with 4500 sheets of print to be collated. We throw our first collating party (SW1 through 8 would be collated and bound by the hands of our friends.) Round and round the room — ten women walking round and round to the tunes of Alix Dobkin, Meg Christian, Nina Simone. (Later one of the women wrote "The Collating Song" to memorialize the occasion.)

July: The little manual saddle-stitch stapler which the printer has loaned us doesn't work. So back we must go to Clover and Mr. G, who by this time would be as relieved to be "shed" of us as we of him. But before we finish packing the boxes in the car, a woman we've never seen shows up at our door. She nervously introduces herself as

Debbie P., a friend of a friend, and chatters away about nothing much; but she knows why she has come and what she wants: she wants a copy of SW1. We tell her that the copies aren't bound yet, to come back in a few days. This won't do. She wants a copy right now, and she'll take it as it is. I go in the office and grab the copy Mr. G had stapled for us. It's a bit soiled by now, but she doesn't mind at all. She pays us in cash for a subscription, but when we ask her address, she says no that she prefers to stop by and pick up a copy of each issue. About a week later she returns with a small blue file case which contains her journal and asks if we mind keeping it for her. We don't mind; we store it in our bedroom closet. She returns the following week just to talk. We have made our first friend through SW. During the next six months she becomes a regular helper with SW, moves out of an intolerable marriage—and the blue file case comes out of the closet. She changes her name from Debbie P. to Debbie Alicen, a name that reclaims her dead mother. When SW moves to Nebraska in '78, she and her woman lover follow the Lady across half a continent.

July 4: As the US of Amerika is celebrating its 200th birthday,

Sinister Wisdom, Volume 1, Number 1, is officially published.

August: Along with Mandy and Paula, two members of the Charlotte Lesbian Press Collective, we drive in Lavender Jane (H's purple Valiant) to Nebraska to attend the first Women in Print Conference. The conference is being held at a Campfire Girls' camp near Omaha. We are as excited as seven-year-old Bluebirds arriving for their first week away from home. Here on the banks of the Platte River, close to the geographic center of the USA, women are gathering from the north, south, east, and west—publishers, editors of women's books, magazines, newsletters, newspapers and comic books; women printers, bookstore managers, librarians and distributors of women's books — all of them (except perhaps Liza and Penny from the new Dyke magazine) more experienced, more seasoned than us. There in the heat, the drought, the constant whistling of the prairie winds, the dried grass jumping with grasshoppers, 130-odd women gather to tell their stories of the vicissitudes of women in print. "What problems have you had? How did you solve them? What mistakes have you made?" We have no problems yet, we haven't made any mistakes yet - we have little to say. We listen to Quest, Country Women, Women: A Journal of Liberation, Lesbian Connection, Dyke, Second Wave, Black Maria, Chomo Uri, Womanspirit, Moonstorm; to Off Our Backs, Plexus, Big Mama Rag, Feminary; to Diana Press, Naiad Press, Daughters, Inc., Lollipop Power, Metis Press, Northwest Matrix, Whole Women Press, Women's Press Collective, Iowa City Women's press, Tower

Press. We learn a lot — about collectives and their struggles, about taxes, about record keeping, about fund raising, about failures, about burn-out, about who is lesbian and who isn't (almost everyone there is), about agents and harassment, about the rising cost of paper, the prohibitive cost of paper, about what-can-we-do-about the exorbitant cost of paper. (One inventive woman begins to experiment - mixing grasshopper juice and prairie grass in the camp kitchen blender to make paper.) We argue over vision and strategy. We form networks. A beaming Barbara Grier keeps reminding us that "History is being made. We are making history!" A distraught June Arnold keeps reminding us to wear our official badge (an elegant gold satin ribbon with Women in Print lettered in bright blue) because there are agents in our workshops, our dining room, our beds! and we must rout them out! ... SW makes friends: WIND (Women in Distribution) wants to distribute the Lady. We learn that despite Majority Report's recent review which had deemed our first issue "murky and pretentious," SW is considered by most women there to be a worthy successor to AQ and The Ladder... It is a heady experience — our heads are reeling — Catherine's head reeled so much that stone-cold sober she slipped in the shower room and broke her ankle. Being the oldest woman there — a fact she's been painfully aware of since she arrived — she is mortified by her sudden glaring helplessness. She wants to hide out the rest of the week in her cot in Merryhill Cabin 2. But this is not allowed: in true Campfire Girl tradition, Women's Press Collective and Country Women make a saddle of their arms and hands and carry her down to the meadow (now dubbed the Mountaingroves' Meadow because Ruth and Jean discovered it and claimed it as Womanspirit space). And as the week draws to a close, we begin to sense our power —begin to believe what we keep telling each other: that we are not an alternative press, but the real press! That through sharing our skills and resources, that together, we will not only survive, we will prevail! (1981—looking back, we recall that there were no black women present; and we do not remember much serious discussion about their absence.)

The Fall: Back in Charlotte. With the help of the network, we locate printers Leslie Kahn and Nancy Blood of Whole Women press in Durham, N.C. They agree to print SW2 on their old and temperamental Multilith 1250, and Diana press (still in Baltimore) agrees to bind it. What a comfort to know that from now on the Lady would be in the gentle, caring hands of lesbian printers ... But editing problems are escalating. Our guest editor, who had felt herself torn apart by the conflicting demands of her writing friends and her publishing friends, is becoming emotionally paralyzed—unable to make decisions. With

Beth now way out in Kansas, misunderstandings are inevitable, and we all make mistakes. But since the three of us had agreed that it was essential to have the special issue on lesbian writing and publishing out in time for the December convention of the MLA in New York City, we reach a point when production has to begin. So dissatisfactions and hurt feelings notwithstanding, H and I make the decisions, and by the skin of everyone's teeth we arrive in NYC with two shopping bags full of the book issue 2. Despite its imperfections and omissions, it was timely and bold and provocative, and we were proud of it. And when Harriet asked Barbara Smith and the black feminist Combahee River Collective to do a special issue of SW^* in the spring, the first year ended hopefully.

II. The Middle — (by Harriet)

In issue 1 we'd promised to publish for a year, and then "if contributions of money and labor materialize, we'll continue for a second year, a second volume of three issues." By the spring of "77, we're jubilant, adding to the notes for issue 3, after a section flippantly titled "How To Go International on Grits and Turnip Greens": "Did we forget to tell you that OF COURSE Sinister Wisdom will be carrying on for another year...or three." The cover of SW 3 is a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two acrobatically inclined women making love, which Harriet is convinced will land us in jail. Instead, at the request of several subscribers, it becomes a fund-raising poster, one that will pull SW out of the red time and time again.

But the summer of "77 is a long hot one, and the notes for issue 4 allude several times to the rise of the white-collar Klan and end with "Voices (Cryptic, in Riddles, at Night)," an attempt to speak indirectly



From SW #1

^{*} This issue didn't materialize because the collective decided it wasn't yet ready to do one.

about something we couldn't speak about directly, our first serious—and what then seemed to us devastating—clashes with lesbian publishers and writers we admired. Here are two of the voices:

(infuriated): But what is a Lesbian magazine supposed to BE? (whisper): ... a guerilla field manual — updated by the full moon. (disgusted): You talk as though Lesbians were an army. Army, hah! An army at each other's throats.

(whisper): Divisions give strength; only keep moving.

Sinister Wisdom did keep moving — at such a pace its history begins to blur.

September 1977. Issue 4 goes to press in Durham, and Gloria Gyn and Debbie Alicen take care of the mail while Catherine and I head for the Midwest, selling magazines, seeing old friends and making new ones, hunting ideas and a likely new home for SW in Ann Arbor, Lansing, Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, Minneapolis, Iowa City, Omaha, Lincoln, Kansas City, Columbia, and St. Louis. Then back to Charlotte and learning to set type on a composer for issue 5. Leigh Star visits in February, and we all get a new form of motion sickness from the giddiness of non-stop talking. She agrees to take over the job of selecting poetry for SW.

But with SW growing, Catherine and I are still yearning after a collective to share the responsibilities of decision making, production, and office work. Soon after number 5 comes out, Julia Penelope calls and says that a group of women in Lincoln will work with SW if we'll move there. We decide to do it, and spend the next several months in a chaos of packing boxes, reminding ourselves that something is bound to come of all this. Mab Segrest arrives from Durham that spring to help us put together SW 6, the final issue of Sinister Wisdom's second year, and the last to be edited in North Carolina.

July 1978. Kitty-Pooh and Sister-Pooh (sister tortoiseshells born on Halloween; our muses and familiars) howl incessantly from Charlotte to an Asheville truckstop, where Kitty-Pooh escapes and we spend three hours coaxing her out of a parked diesel. Eleven hundred miles later, we limp into Lincoln. It is 10:30 at night, the temperature is 100 degrees, the cats have screamed all though western Iowa, but there is a welcoming party at Julia's. Leigh and Sarah Hoagland have exorcised the house my parents rented for us of its born-again-Christian past, and a few weeks later, Deidre McCalla and Llena de la Madrugada play for SW's first benefit, which ends with Deidre singing "The Road I Took to You" and Catherine and I bursting into grateful, if embarrassed, tears.

August-December 1978. The pace accelerates as Sinister Wisdom goes to four issues a year and 3136 "R" Street transforms itself into an unofficial Lesbian Center. The phone rings constantly; friends arrive from both coasts; the basement (SW's first full-size office) fills up with inventory, jerry-rigged desks and work tables, cardboard files. We drive back through Iowa to pick up issue 6, the first of many trips in what will prove to be a long and fruitful (ten-issue) relationship with Joan, Barb, Michelle and Farrell of Iowa City Women's press. A woman in Omaha gives me access to her typesetter for issue 7; Friday work nights are in full swing; SW acquires three contributing editors (Beth Hodges, Mab Segrest, Sarah Hoagland); and Debbie Alicen takes charge of advertising. I begin free-lance copyediting jobs for the university press, and in December — after a favorable Tarot reading by house-mate Bobby Lacey — Catherine and I decide to buy an old IBM composer that will enable us to start a typesetting business as well as provide a much needed resource for Sinister Wisdom.

Ice covers Nebraska — local dykes insist that not every winter is like this one, but we don't believe them — and we're beginning to be subject to a lurking dissatisfaction. The discouraging truth, we say to each other in private, is that help alone will not get us through the next — how many? — years with *Sinister Wisdom*. Ending the magazine is unthinkable, but we seem already, after three years, to be running out of steam.

III. An Ending and a Bridge

Something very intriguing happens in New York City at the end of 1978. It may be an illusory hope, or it may be a way to end our responsibility for *Sinister Wisdom* without ending the magazine herself. We try to shove it to the back of our mind (where it refuses to stay), and get on with the job of making SW better despite the creeping emotional paralysis of its publishers. The notes for issue \mathcal{S} (written in January 1979, the last time we would attempt to be an active written presence in the magazine) try to comprehend and overcome that paralysis:

Doing a lesbian magazine, we had finally recognized with some shock, would continue to be grueling: never enough time, never enough money, and our mistakes compounding themselves. It had become for us an easy relief to stop talking with each other about content and direction, to stop writing "Notes for a Magazine," and to concentrate instead on worrying about filing systems, the tax return the IRS was hounding us about, the guilt-inducing pile of unanswered correspondence. And we did make some headway in solving the practical problems of magazine survival...

We had silently agreed to stop wondering on why's and focus on how's because dreams and desires and their halting articulation in new/old words don't get a magazine out. And yet they do too, in ways we began to sense. We had both seen enough of what cynicism does to Lesbian projects, to Lesbian lives — cynicism, and the hysteria which is its other face. Going through the motions of activism, dropping out, pulling back, lapsing into the undertow of passivity and despair that sucks constantly at our feet; and the other face — the lashings out at other women, the destructive winds that blow through Lesbian groups, Lesbian "communities." We knew what happens when you forget to remember why you're doing what you're doing; and we knew how much easier it is to forget than to remember.

The following two years would be filled with the excitement of traveling to the East Coast and to California, the solidifying of old friendships and the making of new ones, the steady growth of the magazine, escalating free-lance work, personal loss and illness, and the ongoing labor of producing eight more issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. But as 1979 began, our passion for the magazine had already shifted focus and become essentially a passion for assuring its continuation.



Harriet and Catherine photo by Lynda Koolish (#16, 1981)

from SW #17 (1981), Notes for a Magazine Adrienne Rich:

...We believe no art, no writing, exists that is not ultimately political. That language and images have the capacity to bolster privilege and oppression, or to tear away at their foundations. We believe that what we read affects our lives. That the images we look at influence how we see. That there are pictures and words that numb us, dull us, keep us circling in one place, others which can challenge us to the quick, heal and enpower us.

Sinister Wisdom is a part of a political and social web of resistance. In recent years we have seen that network documenting the beginnings of intensive dialogue among women across racial lines... We believe it is no accident that much of this process has been initiated by lesbian/feminists, both women of color and white women. For as lesbians, we are all marginal in our communities of origin: we all

know the meaning of erasure, stigma, otherness, separation.

We want to publish material which makes explicit the experience of women who have often been erased or unheard even within lesbian communities. We want to see a continuing documentation of dialogues on race, and what must inevitably come on their heels, and already is — a wholly new, woman-identified dialogue on class — what that division has meant for all kinds of women, in concrete, womanly terms. We are not interested in work which is limited to claiming some hierarchy of oppressions. The oppression of woman is too complex to be wadded into one vague concept, and every principled formulation that each woman can bring to it is necessary and precious.

We will do whatever we can to encourage and incite work which will make *SW* a resource for women of conscience for the years immediately ahead —years in which timidity and complicity will be increasingly purveyed as appropriate responses to institutional terrorism. We need the best of your imagining, your thinking, your documenting of reality, your wit, anger, criticism and love.

Michelle Cliff:

As Adrienne and I take on the editorship of Sinister Wisdom, I think about the ways lesbian/feminists must work to rededicate ourselves to a woman's revolution. I see the need to bring up the idea of revolution because it can so easily become obscured. And as women we tend not to think in terms of revolution. Che Guevara said that revolution is a process, not an event. It is a process that requires courage and vigilance. Theory and nourishment. Criticism and sup-

port. Anger. And it requires love — for ourselves — for each other. We are women and we have been taught to love: men children. Seldom — if ever — each other. Seldom — if ever — ourselves. We have been taught — and the dominant culture continues to tell us — to direct our affection outward: not inward. To choose to love both ourselves and each other is a revolutionary choice.

We live in a culture in which the word *love* masks other emotions and is used to justify varied forms of expression and objectification. What June Jordan has named "a steady-state deep caring and respect" seems in the mainstream almost nonexistent. We live in a culture the Renaissance helped to create. In which slavery and genocide are

sanctioned. And the power remains in the same hands.

...We need to allow ourselves complexity in our feelings towards each other. We need to admit our anger as well as our love for each other. But we must avoid endangering our emotions with oversimplification. This is a time for us in which we are beginning to face issues which are complicated but which will bring us, through our efforts, into another place on the lesbian/feminist continuum. I think of Elly Bulkin's essay on racism, which appeared in SW 13; Barbara Macdonald's essay on ageism and the youth culture, which appeared in SW16; the work in the disabled women's issue of off our backs; the work in the "Disobedience" issue of Feminary; the Persephone Press anthology This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga; the dialogue between Black and Jewish women edited by Beverly Smith in Conditions 7. The issue which all of these address is the issue of difference between women, of division between women. It is an issue which some lesbian/feminists claim is diversionary, others claim is nonexistent. But unless we continue to address ourselves to this matter of difference and division, I do not think love between us is possible. Not a love with which will translate into power and in turn bring forth revolution.

I approach this editorship with a certain degree of ambivalence. I am a thirty-four year old woman. A lesbian. A woman of color. I have just begun to write, and am selfish about my writing and my time. But I have made a lifetime commitment to a revolution of women. I want to serve this revolution. And I want this revolution to be for all women. I want *Sinister Wisdom* to continue to be informed by the power of women. I want to make demands on this magazine, and I want other women to make demands on it also. I want these demands to include courage and vigilance. Theory and nourishment. Criticism

and support. Anger and love.

from the "Introduction" to *A Gathering of Spirit*: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women, edited by Beth Brant. (SW #22/23, 1983, reprinted as a book and available from Firebrand Books, 141 The Commons, Ithaca, NY 14850)

Jan. 3, 1982 — Montague, Massachusetts. I am visiting Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich, editors of *Sinister Wisdom* ... I ask if they had ever thought of doing an issue devoted to the writing of Indian women. They are enthusiastic, ask *me* if I would edit such a collection. There is panic in my gut ... So I am caught, asking the *inside me*, why did I

raise this if I wasn't willing to take it on?

As I lay in bed that night, I wrestle with this very complicated question. And I struggle with the complicated realities of my life. I am uneducated, a half-breed, a light-skinned half-breed, a lesbian, a feminist, an economically poor woman. Can these realities be accommodated by my sisters? By the women I expect to reach? Can I accommodate their realities? I think about responsibility, about tradition, above love. The passionate, stomach-tightening kind of love I feel for my aunts, my cousins, my sister, my grandmother, my father. And so, I am told — it is time to take it on....

The letters. The poetry. Telling the stories. Drawing the pictures. As each day begins, there is new language and image sitting in my mailbox. But it is old too. And as I sort through and sift over the words, it becomes clearer to me. *The power of the spirit....* The continuity of spirit. We believe in that. We believe in community in its most basic form. We recognize each other. Visible spirit....

We are not "stoic" and "noble," we are strong-willed and resisting. ... We have a spirit of rage. We are angry women.... We are organizers, we are freedom fighters, we are feminists, we are healers. This is not

anything new. For centuries it has been so

We are here. Ages twenty-one to sixty-five. Lesbian and heterosexual. Representing forty Nations. We live in the four directions of the wind. Yes, we believe together, in our ability to break ground. To turn over the earth. To plant seeds. To feed....

We receive and send back. Our energy and voice reworking spirit. Our woman blood, our Indian blood, churning; refusing to be stilled.

We have taken it on. All of us.

— Beth Brant Detroit, 1983 from *SW* #24 (1983), Notes for a Magazine Michelle:

I have learned a lot while working on *Sinister Wisdom* over the past few years — about myself and about the magazine ... I have learned that even after going to the *SW* mailbox approximately 800 times over the past three years — and getting hit by a car once en route — I still get excited by what might be waiting for us in the box ... Since we announced within issue 17 that *SW* would be available free of charge to women in prisons and mental institutions, we have received approximately 300 requests from women in prison. But we have never received a request from a woman in a mental institution; and I wonder about our sisters in those places and what we must do to reach them...

What else have I learned? That the bottom line is very powerful and that we must address the economics of this movement and how we can survive ... These are bad times, but have there ever really been good times for enterprises that want to change the way in which the world is viewed? Of course not ... What can we do about this? ... Above all, I would ask women who have it to give extra capital to women's enterprises, or to invest in these enterprises. Finally, we need more institutions of our own making — more outlets for our words and thoughts, more battered women's shelters, soup kitchens for poor or unemployed women, food cooperatives, places to meet and organize — don't be afraid of starting them ...We must give our our time and our money (those of us who have it is always understood) to those institutions we care about, or else this movement will become only a pastime for women who can afford it, and not something geared to make radical change in the lives of sisters everywhere.

Adrienne:

During the [past] two and a half years or more, we have published eight issues, making visible work of which we are proud, both by women already known in the movement and outside, and by writers and artists whose first publication was in these pages. One double issue—A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women—was entirely organized and edited by Beth Brant ...

During much of the time we have edited SWI have been slowed down by physical pain and its impact on the spirit. Michelle has carried, with unhesitating sense of purpose, far more than her share in the running of the magazine. We both worked through and remained jointly responsible for all substantive decisions, but essentially, she became the managing and sustaining editor, whose dedication, skill and

energy kept the body and soul of *SW* together. (It has therefore seemed truly ironic that some correspondents and contributors chose to assume that I was the "real" editor, or the only one.) One of our real resources was that each of us knew of the other that she was not a quitter, that she would continue to do her utmost. Another was the support of the members of the local women's community, without whose work and spirit we simply could not have gone on....

This has been a time of constraint and instability for small businesses (and a lesbian/feminist journal may be art, spirit, vision, politics, but it is also, unless privately supported and given away free, a small business) — and of slashed Federal and state funding for the arts as well as for human services. SW received two grants from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, matched by volunteer labor and contributions, and they were crucial in helping us hold our

own at time of steadily rising costs....

I sense, from many pieces of correspondence that *SW* has received, that the last few years have been a period of deepening and expanding politics for many North American lesbians. Fear and anger about "fragmentation" in the woman's movement — as if a developing political consciousness could or should possess instant unity — can be seen giving way to a thoughtful rejection of false unity, a reclamation of difference as a source of deeper insight rather than as mere in-fighting: recognition of our class, ethnic, racial and other historical perspectives within our identities as women. Living in a nation increasingly bent on the destruction of its citizens and of all life everywhere, it feels increasingly that personal survival by itself is not survival. What do we mean by liberation? On whose liberation does our own depend? Pinned between the urgency of nuclear danger and the need to build for a long future, much is asked of all of us who care.

10 to 10

from SW #25 (1984), Notes for a Magazine Michaele Uccella and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz:

We bring to SW a triple passion: for women, creativity and liberation...

We thank our readers, especially those who subscribe, for welcoming us as the new editors. We thank Catherine and Harriet, Michelle and Adrienne for, in their separate grapplings with SW, shaping this creature we now inherit to love, tend, feed and be fed to, until it's time to pass her along....

We want to acknowledge another kind of debt: to the other lesbian and feminist publications which inform our geographically scattered communities; connect our spirits; give our artists something so essential that we, in this last decade, almost take it for granted, a vehicle with which to reach an audience.

We will try, during our time with *SW*, to make her — like a good dyke — both tough and sensitive.

from *SW* #26 (1984), a special issue: *To Go To Berbir* — *A Journey and a War* by Jill Drew, the Introduction by **Michaele & Melanie**:

Sinister Wisdom has published continuously more or less on schedule for eight years collections of writings and arts by women-identified-women about women's experience. This special issue SW26 — though clearly by a woman about her experience — breaks this pattern of collectivity, many voices, various forms; and we want to explain why....

Reading the manuscript, both of us felt consumed, overtaken by these words we now place before you. We found the power of the writing impossible to disentangle from the urgency of the content. We also realized that an honest book about a highly polarized situation such as the Middle East is hard to get published, and we wanted this book available as soon as possible. Thus we break the pattern ...

There are those — especially in the United States, where war rarely touches the majority — who unthinkingly support, or fail to oppose, invasions, bombings; forgetting who profits; ignoring who suffers.... We hope that those who listen to these stories of the people of Beirut will be moved, as we have been, as Jill was, to act, to change not the past, which has already taken its deathly shapes, but the present and the future.*

from *SW* #27 (1984) **Melanie:**

In these past few months, *Sinister Wisdom* has gone through some changes. Michaele Uccella, ... having co-edited *SW* 25 and 26, has left *SW*...Gloria Anzaldúa, Beth Brant and Irena Klepfisz, all editors and writers in their own right, are now contributing editors for *SW*...

^{*}The publication of "To Go To Berbir" as issue #26 of SW created a great deal of response — many womyn wrote in support, and many had criticisms of either the content/or the use of SW as a forum for middle-east politics. Letters and editors' statements continued in issues #27-30 (still available — see p. 367).

For the past year, *SW* has been operating without any grants or subsidies. We are functioning entirely on revenues from subscriptions, sales, contributions, and loans ... Also, during this year we have expanded our work to include distributing women's books — Irena Klepfisz's *Keeper of Accounts*, Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz's *We Speak in Code*—and have published our first title, *A Gathering of the Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*, edited by Beth Brant, an expanded edition of *SW 22/23*. We need and intend to achieve economic self-sufficiency. For this we need you.

Several pieces of writing have been submitted to SW which prompt

the following remarks:

Sinister Wisdom will not print writing or art which — whatever the artist's intent — humiliates, dehumanizes, or puts down women — or men — on the basis of race, class, culture, ethnicity, ability, appearance, sexuality ... because they are dark and fat or thin and blond, because their breasts are large or small, because they lack money or formal eduction, because they eat fast food, because they watch TV or don't live in NY or the Bay Area, because they have bad skin or bad teeth or "bad" grammar. Such art damages.

This doesn't mean we won't print work that treats these subjects or even treats them humor. But there's a difference between contemptu-

ous ridicule and humor.

Which is not to say it's always clear — what seems funny to me may seem cruel to others. And displacing prejudice, opening to difference, takes time and lots of stumbling ... At SW we are willing to question our decisions as well as your images; to talk about the delicate balance between political responsibility (which we do not think is a district record) and greative freedom.

think is a dirty word) and creative freedom.

The impulse to rebellion is the breath of intellectual and creative life. At the same time, the impulse towards accountability is the pulse of political change. We want SW to exist on this dialectic, this crosscurrent. We don't see the lack of utter certainty, of iron-clad principles, as a reason to operate without any principles at all. And we reject the notion that there are only two possible stances: a conformist political correctedness vs. prejudice — banal or brutal — persisting unchallenged in the name of artistic freedom.

We also recognize in the absence of absolutes, our own fallibility. We will publish things that hurt somebody. Write us when we do. We will reject work out of fear, ignorance, failure to grasp what matters.

Write us about this as well.

from the Introduction to *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (SW #29/30, 1986), edited by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz (reprinted, expanded and available from Beacon Press):

...We were aware that NJG [Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology] represented an awakening of enormous creative and intellectually energy among Jewish women. And we were eager to continue the momentum. As writers, we wanted to gather an anthology in which a great variety of fine creative and theoretical writing would abound. That was our original impulse....

We wanted to support Israelis who were working on issues we were committed to ... We wanted to strengthen ties between Ameri-

can Jewish and Israeli feminists....

We concluded that the other side of fighting the negative, the hatred of Jews, was to build the positive, Jewish identity; that our task as Jews in the US in the late 20th century was to identify assimilation as a grave concern and then try to work against it by reclaiming our culture and history....

[A]nother purpose of this anthology: to express the wide range of Jewish experience and culture, and to develop more empathy and *support* for Jewish identities which we do not share. ... [T]his anthology — from the very outset — was to present Jewish experience in

which Jewish women are central....

Jewish identity is not just bagels and lox or a prayer shawl: it is activist, feminist, cultural, ethical, delightful, groping, ancient, Sephardic, Ashkenazi, radical, lesbian, international, religious, funny, courageous, loyal, eager, proud....

from SW #31 (1987) Melanie:

I brought to *SW*, as did Michaele, a greater emphasis on class issues and on the experience of working class women. I am proud of this. I'm especially proud to have continued the impetus built by Beth Brant's guest editorship of *A Gathering of the Spirit*, to include Native women's voices. I'm proud of the "focus" format for *SW*, the work on childhood sexuality and sexual abuse in *SW27*; on fat and body image and on work in *SW28*; of Irena Klepfisz's and my co-editorship of *SW29/30*, The Tribe of Dina, and of collecting Jewish women's voices. And, at a time when the women's movement had barely finished polarizing along Zionist/anti-Zionist lines, and then shutting up or down the issues behind the words, I'm proud that *SW* has continued to represent these issues. Sometimes this has drawn heat, for a variety of

reasons, but through these risks I have come to realize that I can live through disapproval even from my own people, lesbians or Jews, and to affirm the living value of controversy. I think SW has not been stale.

Through all this stretching and risking, from the very first issue, Irena Klepfisz has worked with us and then with me in a capacity for which there is no title beyond "sister" or "khaverte" (Yiddish for "comrade," a term she taught me). Officially a contributing editor, in reality she has been a steady source of wisdom, ethics, experience, support, labor and chutzpah. Whatever SW has achieved in these last few years must be credited to Irena as well.

ŠW has remained a journal for lesbians and feminists, resisting pressure — from the mainstream — to disown lesbianism, and — from some lesbians — to disown feminism. I have heard SW described as "no longer radical," though I reject that assessment. SW has, I believe, represented lesbians who are perhaps more isolated from lesbian communities, whose commonality with other women, Jews, rural people, workers, immigrants, whatever, comes into play. I believe SW has expanded out beyond what have sometimes seemed to me narrow confines of what lesbians were supposed to be interested in, to include some of our actual interests and concerns. I am proud of this expansion, proud of the quality of the work we've published ... the fullness of each issue ... SW continues to survive without any grants, to draw sustenance from ... reader support.

And I recognize that it's time for SW to be regrounded in lesbian community, while continuing its commitment to all these issues. Any minority group must, as a people, tug back and forth between separatism and connection, in a dialectic that, at its most useful, can deepen our sense of ourselves as a people and strengthen our relationship to other peoples. I think I have drawn SW towards connection and that Elana will sharpen the edge. I know from Elana's work that she will continue to develop the class politics, to expand the space for women of color and Jewish women, for fat women and disabled women, and for the new groups of women as they emerge, claiming voice. With attacks abounding in the women's press, against separatists by some, against lesbians identified with their home communities (of Jews, Blacks, Chicanas, etc.) by others, it pleases me to expose the falseness and shallowness of this polarization by publicly demonstrating the mutual trust and respect between Elana and myself. I hope SW will be seen as getting what she needs and that continued transformation be the goal.

from SW #32 (1987) Notes From the Editor: A Letter to Elana Dear Elana.

Today is the 19th of March, outside a few flakes of snow, almost Spring, between Purim and *Pesakh*, and I am thinking about genocide, survival, revenge

When I was visiting in February I began leafing through the stack of old *Sinister Wisdoms* piled on the chair beside your living room couch, my bed. In 1976, in the first issue, Harriet expressed her and Catherine's commitment to publish *Sinister Wisdom* for one year —

one year — to print three issues...and then we'll see.

So they saw ... for another 4 years, another 13 issues, 16 in all; and Michelle and Adrienne gave her 2 more years, 8 more issues; and then Michaele and I, less than a year together, two issues, and then me alone, supposedly alone although of course I would have slit my throat without the help, advice, support too mild a word, sustenance, and labor of Irena, Linda, Esther, Helga, Edie, Judy, Bernice, Gloria, Fauna, Morgan, Marianne, you, Dolphin, many many others.

Working on *Sinister Wisdom*, I have — like any well-trained woman — mostly focused on shortcomings ... The truth is, for four years now I've lived with the sense of being always out of control. So today, thinking about turning this over to you, I'm flooded with relief. Relief that I never have to meet another person postcard phonecall asking what is happening with her manuscript; never another panicked search for an elusive bio; no more Linda and me scraping the wax off the paste-up sheet with a razor ... Relief that I will no longer be trying to pay the postofficeprintertyepesetterbillsbillsbills.....

Worst is the sense of work lost through lack of time to work with it, the review that needed attention I never had time to give, the story with promise but me with no time to nurture that promise. I'm reminded again of ... the mother in Tillie Olsen's "TStand here Ironing": She knows what that child would become if she, the mother, could do more, and

she can't. I did what I could. You will do what you can.

This makes it sound grim, and like I did everything by myself. Sometimes I felt like that. I remember times of feeling overwhelmed, alone with the burden, the responsibility; afraid, afraid of deadlines, of controversy. But the truth is also that I was not overwhelmed, I was not alone, I didn't have to be afraid and I'm braver now.

It's four days since I started this letter. Today I felt proud. In 1976 Harriet and Catherine aimed at one year. In 1987 this magazine is still alive and thriving, and in the words of Audre Lorde, we were never meant to survive, none of us, not us, not our children, not our magazines. She is 11 and I helped mother her and now I pass her on, fat and kicking

and I am proud of her good health. And, as children do, she taught me. I learned that the impulse to act, even to act inadequately, incorrectly, without sufficient care is still a more valuable impulse than the drive towards safety, self-protection. I learned there is no point in caution, though there is much point in care. I learned — not well — to give up some control. I learned humility: I will always fuck up. It — whatever it is — will never be perfect. I will always wish I had done more.

And I'm remembering the thrill of seeing those ... first cartons of our first issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 25 — and yesterday, when Kate drove down from the truck depot in Burlington with 38 cartons of *Sinister Wisdom* 31 in her truck ... Morgan and I went racing outside to cut open the first carton we would get our hands on. And the letters, sometimes pissed off, exuberant, sometimes small notes in the margins of subscription renewals, thanking us for our work, giving courage, offering help.

Most wonderful was the discovery, the new writers who sky-rocket out of nowhere I know and explode first in my brain and then onto the printed page. This is how I got addicted to publishing. This is what publishing is for.... I learned that what is in print takes an objective identity, escapes its origins, becomes something else and I learned to be ready for that, to welcome the transformation. I learned the beauty of paying attention to the material side of creation, how the work gets out: to respect the "mechanical uncreative" process.

It's dark now and the snow has been melting all day, Spring, between Purim and *Pesakh*, and I'm thinking again about genocide, survival, resistance ... and the role of culture. The lesson of Amerika is strip bathe shave your head let us see what in you is shameful let us make you ashamed. Genocide can mean killing a people or a people's culture: let a people die or let them live stripped and naked let them lose language history food customs songs which lift a people teach them in their bodies they can join to make something of beauty something of power something of change teach them together they — I should say, together we are something I alone was not.

And I think about the role of *Sinister Wisdom* in this, for lesbians, isolated lesbians, lesbians in prisons, lesbians all over the U.S. and beyond; I think of *Dina* and what it's meant for Jews; I think of Beth's *Gathering*, what it meant to Native Americans ... All this work is about resisting assimilation, resisting the great American whitewash. I know *Sinister Wisdom* is a tool for the making of culture and culture is bread, culture is roses, culture is inspiration, inspiration is the breath of resistance, resistance is how we survive who were never meant to survive. May you survive well together.

mit khaverteshaft and much love

Melanie

from SW #33 (1987) Elana Dykewomon:

I have been given *Sinister Wisdom*. To tend, hold, share, nurture, shape, extend, encourage, challenge and be challenged by, give, pass on when the time comes.

When Melanie and Irena offered *Sinister Wisdom* to me I looked at myself in the mirror: I can write, typeset, print, design, am good with details, am in an urban area where there are both material and emotional/energy resources; I've worked in the Lesbian and Women's movements for 18 years, and I love womyn. I love the sense of vision throbbing in us, possibility, the motion forward, the great adventure it is to be on the boundary. I asked many different kinds of lesbians if they would help. Many said yes (and many are). So I agreed to accept

this gift and this responsibility....

I see that although I have power in shaping SW, I shape first from what comes in the mail. SW is a place. A country. To which lesbians add their own villages, their own geography, issue by issue. Year by year ... I worry about singular editorship — about the nature of hierarchy and the ownership of process ... I also know the efficiency of primary organizers. And I believe that leadership — strength of idea, purpose, willingness to work — should be encouraged among womyn. I talk about this tension between hierarchy and collectivity — no one has any easy answers. That the editorship of Sinister Wisdom changes as it does is part of the solution. That we keep asking questions is another....

Sinister Wisdom has, in its 11 years, been edited primarily by couples ... I am neither coupled or uncoupled. I live in a complex web of lesbic relationships from which I draw the energy for this job ...

I welcome your participation. Join us in this written country. I am glad to acknowledge the outreach that previous editors have done. SW has a broad base of contributors — Native American, Chicana, Black, Asian, Jewish, Arab, Ethnic, White, working-class, poor, middleclass, disabled, able-bodied, fat, thin, old, young, survivors and fighters ... I myself am a Jew, fat, middle-class, sometimes-disabled, a survivor of mental hospitals ... I have been a lesbian and a writer all my life.

Often it seems like a fog of boredom, cynicism, of oh — we've-been-through-that-already, has spread through our various communities. [But] we [still] don't have a womyn's economy. We don't have lesbian centers. We have no shelters or on-going homes for lesbians in need at any age. We haven't figured out how to share our resources with womyn in crisis, let alone as full communities ... We don't use the word "patriarchy" anymore — it sounds too antagonistic, too dated.

But we haven't even begun to scratch at the patriarchal nationalist military machine/mentality. We haven't encouraged all womyn to withdraw their energy and support from men's causes. We barely know what womyn's causes are. We have so much more to learn about each other, about our cultures-of-origin, our different perspectives on ethics and justice ... As womyn in the United States, we have little international perspective. I haven't met a womyn yet who has unworked the prick inside her head. The fact is, there is very little lesbian space in the world, outside of our homes....

We need each other in order to exist. And the more we exist, the

more we change the world....

It's true. I'm a separatist. That means first, everything I do, I try to do for/with lesbians.... Idon't intend for SW to be focused on debate about separatism. I do intend for SW to be a place where any lesbian may be included. Just as we will not publish racist, classist, ageist, ableist or sizeist statements, we will not print anything that's oppressive or demeaning to lesbians. SW has a long history of radical and separatist lesbian energy, and I intend to affirm that history and encourage that energy in the present.

I have such desire to bring together, to root out the best, to enthuse us for the long haul; to get lesbians to trust each other again for real reasons (not just "sisterhood" in name) — to keep us arguing without hating each other. I believe that disagreements strengthen us, help us move, keep us honest. Ilong for honesty and depth between womyn....

Let's restimulate a passion for revolution. We are powerful, we can affect each other and the large events around us. We all know how painful it can be to love womyn—the disappointments, the ones who turn away and the ones who won't come forward when we're ready to change. But it remains true that loving lesbians is fun. That change, no matter how upsetting, is exciting. That ... generosity of the spirit is creative, creativity is joyful. That building things together is sweet and satisfying. That we need satisfaction in our lives. [We need] that sense of purpose, coupled with flexibility and imagination.

from SW #35 (1988) on Passing Elana:

The ways we pass (or don't) aren't necessarily equal. Among lesbians, to pass is either to present yourself as a man or as a straight woman. Among people of color, passing is often about reflecting "whiteness," of second-guessing those in power. For working class and poor women, adopting the language and symbols of the middle class are forms of passing. But to pass or not have the option of passing

based on skin color is not the same experience as being able to pass or not as a heterosexual. For a womon to try and pass as a man is nothing like what it was for jews to try and pass as gentiles in nazi germany....

We pass to survive. We get used to the privileges we get by passing and we forget to question ourselves on the cost of those privileges. We forget we get privilege, because passing is so built in. The dominant culture wants to assimilate as many marginal people as it can into its middle-management positions, in order to have shields for its actions. ... The more we pass within the boundaries of patriarchal society, the more we are identifying with that society... whether we mean to or not.... Sometimes our major struggle to survive makes other privileges seem trivial ... We may get angry at each other around passing issues...

Of course, in any given situation or historical moment, some oppressions will be much more threatening to a womon's survival than others. We have to be able to make the fine distinctions between what is crucial to our individual survival at a given moment and what

is not — and no one can decide that for us ...

Passing is handed down, generation to generation: how to be acceptable to men; how to pass for white if that's an option for us, how to pass as acceptable to whites if it is not; how to hide a disability; how to avoid looking old; how to be good girls.... We have to understand how much pressure there is on all of us to pass all the time, and understand that pressure — which makes each of us "the other," "the outsider" — as a crime against our natures ... The trouble is passing tends to wear away our centers. It makes us doubt our own realities, our sense of our culture, it feeds on our self-hate. It's too easy to believe we are making thoughtful or necessary concessions and end up compromised instead....

One of *Sinister Wisdom's* primary purposes is to encourage every kind of lesbian to work towards conscious personal resolution as well as community identification and resolve: a motion towards hope: towards the ability to feel individual purposefulness supported by community progress. In order to do that work, we have to be visible to ourselves and to each other as who we are.

from *SW* #36 (1988) on Surviving Psychiatric Assault and Creating Emotional Well-Being in Our Communities Elana:

Writing the introduction for this issue has been harder than any other... I have friends and lovers who were locked up; I have friends and ex-lovers who are therapists, ex-therapists and anti-therapists ... During production, I dreamt frequently that I was locked up again;

that the mental institutions were left standing while the coffee-shops

where inmates planned our rebellions were razed.

I have believed for a long time that a radical analysis of what's called madness has to be a major cornerstone of lesbian theory. Every womon, of every age, color, class, ability, is threatened by the existence of mental institutions ... Womyn are encouraged, more and more, to seek "professional help" in order *not* to go crazy. Why the idea of "losing control" is threatening deserves a paper itself.... [A]lmost every womon I have ever met has a secret belief that she is just on the edge of madness, that there is some deep, crazy part within her, that she must be on guard constantly against "losing control" — of her temper, of her appetite, of her sexuality, of her feelings, of her ambition, of her secret fantasies, of her mind.

What is "crazy" of course changes from culture to culture, between classes, over time. It is evident that governments and men have a tremendous stake in defining what is and isn't real, what can and can't be allowed. Though we know this, we haven't successfully

incorporated it into our personal and political lives.

As lesbians, we know that it means to be called "sick," "deviant," "unnatural"... Next to the physical war against women (incest, battering, rape within the family and on the street), there is the psychologi-

cal war — the war against women's minds.

I hear a story of a young Black woman who cannot be convinced she doesn't smell bad; she scrubs her armpits with steel wool. She has been sent to a rich, white therapist. I hear stories of lesbians who put glass in their vaginas. They're in therapy. I hear stories of teenage girls who can't believe they are thin enough even though they're starving. They're in therapy. I know ... womyn who don't believe they can do anything, who don't feel they can be effective. They're in therapy.

When we hate ourselves we think we should be cut, mutilated, starved. We no longer seem to see these as social patterns but as individual problems. What has stopped us in our tracks and has us wandering from therapist to guru to astrologers and back, caught up in perpetually getting our shit together? What happened to study groups, to action groups, to rape speak-outs, to spray painters and saboteurs? Why aren't all the feminist therapists, who say they are concerned with a radical analysis and new forms of healing, refusing to use the diagnostic labeling system that gives power to the system? What happened to the spirit of rebellion? Did it have an unhappy childhood, does it need bodywork?

On the other hand, women I love and respect, with whom I have shared two decades of political work, argument, analysis, have

become therapists and social workers.* Many are lesbians who found themselves no longer physically able to hold careers as carpenters or mechanics, who now work with recovering addicts, gay and lesbian teenagers, lesbians who have been stuck inside cycles of welfare and state institutions all of their lives. While I believe that womyn will never begin to be free until we give up on romantic love and stop going to therapy, there is a part of me that hopes anyone determined to get therapy has the good fortune to find ... lesbians like my friends.

...Right now, we (mostly) depend on therapists to interrupt behavior which we can't handle within our friendship networks...As long as we are not prepared for the days (or months) when some dyke can't "keep a grip" anymore, we will all rely on therapist to take care

of "inconvenient," threatening or unendurable behavior.

And it's also clear that introspection and self-awareness are not luxuries, but part of a full and productive life. We—lesbian therapists and the rest of the lesbian community—need to find ways to explore our depths outside the fifty minute hour...I'd like to see forums on mental health in which therapists and the rest of us participate as equal members... More talking, more writing, more issues like this one, where we can show each other not only our center, but our farthest edge.

from SW #41 Il Viaggio Delle Donne: Italian-American Women Reach Shore (1990), edited by Janet Capone and Denise Leto Janet Capone:

Looking back, it feels like no surprise that the California earthquake of '89 happened while Denise Leto and I were on the phone in Oakland discussing *Sinister Wisdom*'s Italian-American issue. It was

^{*} The majority of the womyn *I* know who have become therapists are working class. Many folks believe that therapy is an indulgence of the middle class, that working class people don't have the time or money to sit around talking about what their mothers did to them when they were three. In the Bay Area, at least, there are numerous working class and lesbian of color therapists, and many working class womyn who make going to therapy a priority, as well as low and no-fee clinics for lesbians. Poor and working class womyn remain more likely to get locked up in state institutions. One of the major questions about class and therapy is how therapy takes white middle- and upper-class behaviors as the norm, and uses that norm to make working class people and people of color feel "deviant" for having different class and community values. Is the proliferation of therapists and therapy-goers in working class and minority communities more evidence that they are being politically chilled out, or that they're taking their emotional well-being in their own hands? Or both?

a profound shift, the earth taking care of herself, readjusting, and in the process readjusting the priorities and values of us humans living on top of her. During those intense 15 seconds, I remember standing under my doorway yelling my head off, realizing with fear and excitement that I was witnessing something in motion that was much more powerful than myself. With the publication of this issue, a profound shift has also taken place for me, and I believe, for Italian/Sicilian descended women in general. With this new collection of works, the geography changes — for us, as a group, and within our women's and lesbian communities. As the title suggests we have arrived. We move from relative obscurity as ethnic American women, to greater visibility, always an exciting and frightening thing....

With this issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, another silence is broken, not only for Italian/Sicilian-descended women, but for Italian/Sicilian-descended lesbians, which this collection primarily focuses on. In this sense, this anthology is the first of its kind to exist. Now, the lesbians can hear each other's voices, read each other's words, and get a clearer

image of ourselves in the process.

Why a focus on the lesbians of Italian-American descent? As lesbian women, we often have a different and sometimes more difficult relationship to our birth families. Many of us have had to leave our families of origin in order to come out. This leave-taking is never without pain and loss of some sort. What has this meant for us? What impact has it had on our understanding of our culture and ethnicity? Did we lose track of our Italianness along the way? If so, it's clear to me, paesane mie, that we need each other all the more! We cannot reclaim our culture in isolation! And in reclaiming, I think we are finding that it's possible to be Italian/Sicilian identified and lesbian at the same time. What a concept! What a relief!

Denise Leto:

Why an Italian-American women's issue? To give us the opportunity to speak, to reach out to one another, to connect, to raise consciousness about the issues Italian- and Sicilian-American lesbians face. To have fun, to have a feast, to celebrate who we are. To begin

to preserve our voice, not yet entirely lost or silenced.

What a gift it has been to have worked on this issue. What an exhilarating, grueling, transforming journey. Each step took faith. Faith that our Sicilian- and Italian-American sisters would have the strength and vision to speak, to create, to respond and faith that our non-Italian sisters would have the openness and willingness to listen. And this is a special issue for us all.

If Sinister Wisdom is a country — and I believe it is — then welcome to this particular place on the map. The building of a context is delicate and the magnitude of the task breathtaking. For the first time a place like this exists for Italian- and Sicilian-American lesbians and women to gather, to reminisce, to recognize, to share, to spark each other. This is a beginning. One more step in "il viaggio delle donne."

from SW #42 (1990), Notes for a Magazine Elana:

Lesbian Voices: This may come as a surprise to you, but this is the first intentionally all-lesbian* issue of *Sinister Wisdom* since 1976. In May, inspired by a subscriber's letter, the editorial group unanimously decided to make *Sinister Wisdom* dedicated lesbian space....

What is a lesbian voice? How do we choose the ones we want to present out of the hundreds of lesbians who send us their work?

Because the editorial readers of *Sinister Wisdom* have such diverse backgrounds and tastes how we choose is complicated.... Recently we've decided not to consider work written as first person narrative cross-culturally (a white dyke writing in the voice of a black dyke; a christian writing in the voice of a jew, for instance).... Imagine eleven lesbians having this discussion for days, trying to agree on a policy.

What I hope is that the urgency and angst of our editorial discussions carry over—that when you read *Sinister Wisdom* you want to talk about it with other dykes—that at least some of the writing we print disturbs you, moves you, makes you feel less isolated with your

questions, grief and joy....

It was my privilege this summer to represent *SW* at the 4th International Feminist Bookfair in Barcelona, Spain. All over the world there are lesbians struggling ... We *can* get together and understand each other, based on respect and our desire to listen. What we need to give each other is our continued willingness to risk — to take the chance, in the face of oppression, under threats of censure, beatings, jailings, isolation, betrayal. We need to risk going on with it — and live to tell our stories...

^{*} SW #2, on Lesbian Writing and Publishing, was, as far as I can tell, the only other purposely all-lesbian issue. Many issues have been all-lesbian, but not by prior editorial decision.

Sondra Knight (#38, 1989)

Sable

blistered sister better now. big-hipped mama holding on. bionomics at its best.

bleeding we-womb flowing free. under/down/beneath it all. burgeoning.

betrayed, bereaved. be stilled/the rage. all passing now.

all whispers now. all close. all touched. all givings born.

blessed are the berries, dark and sweet.



Carolyn Gage (#37, 1989)

On Singing Women's Praises

Yes, it's true —
I only know one song.

But that one song takes all the notes And lasts forever. Lois Anne Addison: An aging dyke now living in Canada. Unlike so many former separatists that I know, I do not feel that I was somehow "pressured" to make changes during those early separatist years. My separatist years remain profoundly important to me, and I do not regret any of the choices or changes that I made.

Mia Albright (b. 1948). Author of *How to Build a Feminist Bridge* (Ananke's Womon Publications; 1989) and *Feminism: Freedom from Wifism* (Nationalist Feminist Studies Institute; 1987). She lives in New York City.

Donna Allegra: I'm an African-Caribbean American. My writing life was born in journaling at 14. In 1974 (?) I was a founding member of Jemima, probably the first self-conscious Black lesbian writers group, where I discovered a voice in poetry. I have works in Sinister Wisdom, Conditions, Heresies, Azalea, Common Lives/Lesbian Lives and Lesbian Ethics. I have short stories in Lesbian Love Stories, Vol. II (ed. by Irene Zahava), Out The Other Side (ed. by Christian McEwen), The Original Coming Out Stories (ed. by Julia Penelope and Sarah Hoagland), Lesbian Poetry (ed. by Joan Larkin) and places I just can't ... remember. I'm also a dancer, African drummer and performer. I earn my keep as an electrician.

Paula Gunn Allen (b. 1939). Laguna Pueblo/Lakota Native American, Scots-Irish and Lebanese-American. Professor, English, UCLA. She was awarded the Native American Prize for Literature in 1990, and that same year her anthology of short stores, Spider Woman's Granddaughters was awarded the American Book Award and the Susan Koppelman Award. A major Native American poet, writer and scholar, she's published seven volumes of poetry (most recently Skins and Bones), a novel—The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, a collection of essays—The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions, and two anthologies—Studies in American Indian Literature and Spider Woman's Granddaughters, Native American Women's Traditional and Short Stories.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa is a Chicana tejana dyke-feminist poet-writer-theorist from south Texas now living in Santa Cruz. She received an NEA award for fiction in 1991. She is author of Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza (1987), co-editor of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981) and editor of Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras—Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color (1990). Forthcoming: Entreguerras, entremundos/Civil Wars Among the Worlds, a book of autobiographical-fiction narratives; and Lloronas, Women Who Wail: Explorations of (Self)-Representations and Identities and the Production of Writing and Knowledge.

June Arnold contributed her great creative energy to the "second wave" of feminism as a co-founder of Daughters Inc., an organizer of the women-inprint movement, and the author of *The Cook and the Carpenter*, *Sister Gin*, *Applesauce* and *Baby Houston*. She died in 1982.

Diane Ayott, born in 1953 in Lynn, Massachusetts, has attended a variety of schools in the Boston area, including the Art Institute and Mass. College of

Art. She hold both graduate and undergraduate degrees. Over the past ten years, Diane Ayott has been involved in developing and exhibiting her painting, as well as teaching. From 1988 through 1990, she lived, painted and exhibited her work in Germany. Currently, she has her home and studio in Beverly, Mass.

SDiane Bogus would like to thank you for reading her work and following her career. She requests your support for W.I.M. Publications (2215-R Market St., SF, CA 94710), and her poetry press. 45, Aquarius, Buddhist, Black, Ph.D. and author of six books, the latest two: *Dykehands* and *The Chant of the Women of Magdalena*.

Barrie Jean Borich is a poet and essayist who lives in Minneapolis. She was the 1990 recipient of the Academy of American Poets Prize at the Univ. of Minnesota and her work has been published in a number of small press publications including *Minnesota Writes: Poetry, an Anthology of Minnesota Poets* (Nodin/Milkweed Editions). She was one of the founding editors of the *Evergreen Chronicles*, a gay and lesbian literary journal.

Beth Brant is a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory in Ontario. She is the editor of *A Gathering of Spirit*, a collection of writing and art by Native American women (Firebrand Books, 1989). She is the author of *Mohawk Trail*, prose and poetry (Firebrand, 1985) and *Food & Spirits*, short fiction (Firebrand, 1991). Her work has appeared in numerous Native and feminist anthologies and she has done readings, lectures and taught creative writing throughout North America. She currently lives in Michigan and is a lesbian mother and grandmother. She has received the Michigan Council For the Arts Creative Artist grant in 1983 and 1986. She is the recipient of a National Endowment For the Arts Literature Fellowship for 1991.

Linda Jean Brown is a citizen of the African-American, Mohawk and Cherokee nations. She is the author of *Songs For The End of The World*, a forthcoming collection of short fiction, documenting progressive lives from the last quarter century (1965A.D.-1991A.D.).

Elly Bulkin is a middle-aged, middle-class Jewish dyke who helps edit *Bridges*, a Journal for Jewish Feminist and Our Friends; wrote Enter Password: Recovery (1990); and co-authored with Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith, Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism (1984).

Sandra Butler is a writer and community organizer who works in the field of violence against women. She has recently recovered from thyroid cancer and is propelled by the urgencies of time, the solidity of community and the grace of women's language.

Sarita Johnson Calvo has contributed illustrations to progressive causes in the Bay Area for almost a decade. A recent graduate of the California College of Arts & Crafts, Sarita is currently teaching a class for the Oakland Museum in conjunction with the "I Dream A World" exhibit. She is working on a second coloring book and a series of anti-war paintings.

Janet Capone is a lesbian poet, editor, and fiction writer of Neopolitan descent. She lives in Oakland, Ca., and is completing her first novel, which is about a young girl growing up Italian-American.

Caryatis Cardea: I am a 40-year-old working-class, disabled separatist of Irish and French-Canadian descent. I was a dyke then, I'm a dyke now, I will always be a dyke.

Susan Cavin, author of *Lesbian Origins*, lives with her lover, Laura Zeidenstein and their son, Julian Cavin-Zeidenstein, in Brooklyn, NY.

Anita Cornwell was the first Black lesbian to "come out" in print. She is the author of *Black Lesbian in White America* (Naiad), and lives in Philadelphia.

Lynn Crawford's work has appeared previously in *Sinister Wisdom, Broadside* (A Canadian Women's Publication), San Francisco Bay Guardian, In Process: A Journal of Spiritual Practise. She is a psychotherapist and Zenstudent in San Francisco.

Chrystos: born in 1946, San Francisco of Menominee father & Alsace-Lorraine/Lithuanian mother. Self-educated. Author of *Not Vanishing* and *Dream On* & contributor to many anthologies. Sober since 1988. Land & Treaty Rights activist, also working for the release of Leonard Peltier.

Susan Chute is one of the women we couldn't find.

Michelle Cliff's latest book is the collection of short fiction, *Bodies of Water* (Dutton, 1990).

Tee A. Corinne's *Cunt Coloring Book* is still in print after 16 years, along with Family: Art About Growing Up In An Alcoholic Family, Dreams of The Woman Who Loved Sex and Lovers. She is the editor of Intricate Passions and the newly released Riding Desire.

Martha Courtot: I am a fat working-class lesbian who is now a lesbian grand-mother! In August I will be 50 years old. I continue to write poems/essays/ and stories that reflect my own experience as a mother/lover/ and spiritual woman. I mourn the disconnection of feminism from so much contemporary lesbian culture. Unfortunately, oppression of fat women has only worsened in the years since I wrote "A Spoiled Identity." Fat women continue to be survivors in one of the worst batterings of selfhood in our culture. I'm lonely these days and welcome correspondence. 1106 Albion Pl., Santa Rosa, CA 95401.

Casey Czarnik is no longer involved in the lesbian movement.

Max Hammond Dashú: I am a feminist, internationalist historian and proud to be self-educated. 15 years after the publication of my comic book, *Witch Dream*, I am back to work in this art form. I love the mountains, Ethiopian music, and my girlfriend.

Diana Davies has been a photojournalist since the early '60s. She has been widely published, from *LIFE* to *Sinister Wisdom*, and her photographs are in collections at The Smithsonian, Howard Univ. and Swarthmore College Peace Library. For more than 10 years she has been documenting archaeological artifacts from the ancient culture of women worldwide. Her most recent book, *Photojourney*, spans liberation movements from the '60s -'80s, and is available (\$17.50 post. paid) from Bag Lady Press, POB 462, Belfast, ME 04915.

A native of Iowa, currently living in Oakland, **DeeAnne Davis** is the editor of *Aché, A Journal for Black Lesbians*, and sits on the board of Aunt Lute Books Publishing. Her work has been published in *Sinister Wisdom* and *Word of Mouth* (Crossing Press, 1990).

Barbara Deming was a peace, civil rights and lesbian-feminist activist. Her last major focus was on the Women's Peace Encampment at Seneca Falls. Her experiences there were recounted in *Prisons That Could Not Hold* (Spinsters, Inc.), published posthumously.

Elise Dodeles: I am a fine artist and illustrator living and working in New York City. I belong to a lesbian arts group here and I am devoting myself to getting my work seen within the community and outside it.

Elana Dykewomon's first book, *Riverfinger Women*, will be reprinted by Naiad in 1992. She wishes she knew how to thank you enough for *Sinister Wisdom* and the lesbian world we share.

Deborah Edel is a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and is actively involved in the ongoing process of keeping the archives running as smoothly as possible. During the day she works as an educational psychologist with children with hearing problems. She has recently returned to school on Saturdays to further her education. On Sundays she likes to sleep late.

Harriet Ellenberger was a founding member of the Charlotte Women's Center (North Carolina, 1971) and a founding partner in L'Essentielle Éditrices (French/English women's bookstore and publishing house, 1987). Currently lives in Montreal, working on poems and a theatre project, looking for editing jobs. Sends greetings to old friends in States, who've probably long since given her up for dead.

Lee Evans: I am a white Lesbian Separatist of Welsh-German-Mexican descent living in Cleveland, Ohio. It ain't all that bad. I can't imagine why this information is interesting to anyone other than my friends, which leads me to the next question: Are there any ghostwriters who know how to spice up these little bios?

Since 1982 **Karlene Faith** has been with Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, B.C., where she teaches courses on women and the law and is involved with local and international women's issues and activities. She recently helped found The Feminist Institute for Studies on Law and Society. She is also a grandmother.

Marilyn Frye lives in Lansing, Michigan, where she works to build and maintain lesbian community, and teaches Women's Studies and Philosophy at Michigan State Univ. Her various excellences are due largely to living and loving for seventeen years with Carolyn Shafer. She is grateful to be spending the academic year 1990-91 in Minneapolis, reading and writing at the excellently-named Center for Advanced Feminist Studies.

Carolyn Gage is a lesbian/feminist playwright with a women's liberation theatre, No To Men Productions. She tours nationally with her one-woman show, *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc (Sinister Wisdom #35)* and gives workshops on women's playwriting. Her lesbian musical *The Amazon All-Stars* has made national headlines with an ACLU lawsuit defending a teacher who lost her job for her affiliation with the project. She is author of the *No To Men Theatre Collection*.

Barbara Grier is the CEO of Naiad Press and a lifelong activist in the lesbian movement. She lives in a pine forest in North Florida with Donna J. McBride,

assorted cats and dreams of collecting shells from beaches thousands of miles from the nearest telephone.

Susan Griffin is the author of *Women and Nature* and *Pornography and Silence*. Her play *Voices* won an Emmy and her recent collection of poetry, *Unremembered Country*, won the Commonwealth Silver Medal. She has been awarded a MacArthur Grant in peace and international cooperation to complete her work in in progress, *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*, to be published by Doubleday in 1992. She is active in both the eco-feminist and women's health activist movements.

Gloria Gyn is one of the women we couldn't find.

JEB (Joan E. Biren), author of Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front, still works for visibility and loves lesbian images. After 20 years as a photographer, JEB now works primarily in video. With Moonforce Media she released For Love and For Life, a video on the 1987 March on Washington. Beyond Coming Out, a new video on overcoming internalized homophobia, is currently in production.

Mabel Hampton died in October of 1989.

Janice J. Hansen's work has been widely exhibited in the last twelve years. She'll be exhibiting in June '91 at Arts Interaction, 711 W. 168th St., NYC (Entrance off Haven St.).

Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1951 and is an enrolled member of the Creek Tribe. She has published four books of poetry, most recently *In Mad Love and War* (Wesleyan U. Press). A professor in creative writing at the Univ. of New Mexico and on the steering committee of the En'owkin Centre International School of Writing (for Native American writers), she has recently received the Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature from PEN Oak-land, the 1990 American Indian Distinguished Achievement Award, and an NEA Fellowship. She is at work on a fifth collection of poetic prose, *The Field of Miracles*, and an anthology of Native women's writing from North through South America, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, and plays saxophone with her band.

Bertha Harris' books include: Catching Saradove, Confessions of Cherubino, The Joy of Lesbian Sex and Lover.

Sarah Lucia Hoagland was a contributing editor to Sinister Wisdom from 1978 to 1980. She was also guest editor of SW15 with Julia Penelope. She is author of Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value, and co-editor with Julia Penelope of For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology (Onlywomen Press). It was the work of Harriet and Catherine in creating and sustaining SW as well as in encouraging writers — believing in us, both in acceptances and rejections (their letters of rejection were considered treasures) — that had a lot to do with my struggling on to find a way to develop and write and publish Lesbian Ethics. These years of SW were a time of magic for me.

JLF 52 artistic, political, literary interests sks sincere LFs for friendship via letter. Old & new friends pls write **Beth Hodges** c/o *Sinister Wisdom*. Will resp immed.

Jerusha is one of the women we couldn't find.

Barbara Johnson: born in Chicago in 1949, I am a painter/printmaker, residing in Northampton, MA. I enjoy doing portraits, still lifes and large-scale murals and installations expressing a sense of mystery about reality. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz is the author of My Jewish Face and Other Stories (Aunt Lute, 1990). She is co-chair of the New Jewish Agenda National Task Force on anti-semitism and racism.

Irena Klepfisz is an activist in the lesbian-feminist and Jewish communities, a founding editor of *Conditions*, and a contributing editor to *Sinister Wisdom* since 1984. Her most recent books are *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue*—

Poems Selected and New (1971-1990) and Dreams of an Insomniac — Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes (both from 8th Mountain Press, 1990). She is the co-editor of Jewish Women's Call for Peace: A Handbook for Jewish Women on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Firebrand Books).

Sondra Knight: Self-defined; I am what I write.

Lynda Koolish teaches in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, and is currently completing a book on feminist revisionings of the slave narratives. She continues to live in Berkeley much of the year, despite the madness of a Berkeley/San Diego commute. She photographs mainly those writers whose work she loves, and — after a fourteen year hiatus — she has begun to write poems again.

Peggy Kornegger now lives in Mass., after many years of bi-coastal living. **Denise Leto** is a poet and performer who lives in Oakland. She is currently working on a play whose main characters are Italian-American. To *SW*, amiche, bravissima!!

Linda Marie lives in San Francisco and has been a writer for a number of years. She has three fish.

R. Ruth Linden is a sociologist with interests in the holocaust, women's narratives, Jewish-feminisms and cultural studies. In 1990 she was named first recipient of the Helen Hooven Santmyer Prize in feminist studies for her book *Making Stories, Making Selves: Writing Sociology After the Holocaust*, to be published in 1991 by the Ohio State Univ. Press. She lives and teaches in Conn. but San Francisco is still — and always — her home.

Audre Lorde is retired from teaching. She now lives in St. Croix, V.I., where she's still making trouble, and working on a novel

Barbara Macdonald is a writer and activist. She is author, with Cynthia Rich, of Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism.

Judith McDaniel is a writer, teacher, and political activist with a rich fantasy life. She has just published her first lesbian romance, *Just Say Yes*. She is also the author of *Metamorphosis*: *Reflections on Recovery* and *Sanctuary*: *A Journey*.

Anne Mi Ok Bruining is entrenched in chasing an M.S.W. degree in NYC and hopes to find herself in S.F. in a few months and become bi-coastal. Mi Ok and Sharon Lim-Hing are currently co-editing a national Asian Pacifica Lesbian anthology.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai lives in East Tennessee.

Cherríe Moraga is the author of Loving in the War Years — Lo Que Nunca Paso Por Sus Labios, and co-editor of — This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (adapted into Spanish in 1988) and Cuentos, the first collection of stories by Latina feminists in the U.S. Her plays have been produced since 1985, including Giving Up the Ghost, Shadow of A Man, and Heroes & Saints. She was a co-founder of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and her poetry, essays and theatre pieces have been widely anthologized. She is currently an instructor of Writing and Theatre in Chicano Studies at UC Berkeley.

Jasmine Marah — enigmatic, eclectic, elastic, eccentric, enthusiastic, fat, forty, furious fotomaker.

Joan Nestle, 51 years old, is co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and author of *A Restricted Country*. She is indebted to publications like *Sinister Wisdom* for giving her a place to live as a writer.

Catherine Nicholson: I want to thank all of the lesbians — the editors, writers, typesetters, printers, shippers and the readers — who have kept *Sinister Wisdom* alive for 15 years. I can't wait to read this 15th Anniversary Issue, and I plan to live to read the 30th anniversary issue, and the 60th, and so on if my eyes hold out. P.S. I now live in Durham, N.C. and would like each and every one of you to visit me at sometime.

Dee dee NiHera wrote in #36: I have survived psychiatric cages and many other forms of violence against women in my 40 years. I am active in the battered women and mad movements. Loving women, teaching healing practices of the world, and living in Alaska help keep me hopeful.

Linda Marie Nolte lives in St. Paul, Minn., with her lover, Susan, in a house full of animals, vegetables, minerals and books. She can be reached at PO Box 40213, St. Paul, MN 55104.

Achy Obejas is a Cuban-American poet, fiction writer and playwright who lives and works in Chicago. Her work has appeared in *The Best of Helicon Nine, Nosotras: Latina Literature Today, Abraxas: 20th Anniversary Issue, Conditions, Revista Chicano-Riquena,* and many others. In 1986, she received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in poetry.

Emily Oddwoman is the journal/witch name of Emily Erwin Culpepper. A longtime activist passionately committed to the liberation of women, she is currently Director of Women's Studies at the University of Redlands, in Redlands, CA. She is delighted to be able to teach a course on "Lesbian Studies."

Julia Penelope is the author of Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues, co-author of Found Goddesses and The D.Y.K.E. Game and co-editor of For Lesbians Only, The Original Coming Out Stories and Finding the Lesbians. Her work has appeared in numerous publications and anthologies. Currently she's working on a history of lesbianism, a crossword puzzle book, an anthology of lesbian-feminist literary criticism, a lesbian culture anthology, a collection of international feminist fiction, and a cookbook celebrating WASP ethnic cooking (jello, cheeze-whiz, wonder bread). She lives (quite happily) in Massachusetts, where she writes and is celebrating her 50th birth year, 36 years of dykehood.

Minnie Bruce Pratt's most recent book is *Rebellion and Other Essays*, forthcoming from Firebrand Books, 1991. Her volume of poetry, *Crime Against Nature*, was the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1989 by the Academy of American Poets.

Sudie Rakusin: I am an artist, a Lesbian, Jewish, an Aries with 5 other planets in Fire. I live in North Carolina heaven in the woods with my three dog companions painting and drawing every chance I get.

Coletta Reid lives in San Francisco and is executive director of the Women's Institute for Mental Health. She is currently writing about the early history of the women's and lesbian-feminist movement.

Adrienne Rich is working on a book about poetry and politics. Her most recent books of poetry are *Time's Power* (1988) and *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (Fall, 1991). She is a founding member of the editorial collective for *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminist and Our Friends.*

Cynthia Rich's most recent work is *Desert Years: Undreaming the American Dream* (Spinsters Book Co.).

Rebecca Ripley is Jewish, disabled, working, over 40, still mad, and proud of her naturally curly brains.

J.R. Roberts lives in Massachusetts.

Barbara Rosenblum died of breast cancer on February 14, 1988. *Cancer in Two Voices*, from which these excerpts have been taken, will be published in the fall of 1991. It is a document of the psychological, relational, political and social dimension of her life with cancer. Her essay "Living in a Changing Body" has appeared in *Outlook*, Spring 1988 and *New Statesman*, UK, Volume 115 #2968 February 1988.

Joanna Russ: I've been a feminist since 1969, on good days and bad, from ignorance into at least some kind of broader knowledge. I always make mistakes — but notice them (I hope) and (I hope) learn from them — knowing now that anti-racism and some kind of socialism must be part of feminism if we're to get anywhere — and that "we" is a tricky word, full of implicit exclusions. If this essay helps anybody, good. It's part of a book, Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts (Crossing Press). I've also written short stories and novels for the last thirty-one years. Oh my, that long!

Barbara Ruth is pleased to announce she has been surgery-free since 1987. She is currently leaving Oakland for a more rural locale where she plans to go for frequent walks, spend more time writing to her lesbian friends in prison, and resist the war-mongers the best ways she knows how. And that ain't all.

Teya Schaffer writes with the support of her Jewish Lesbian writers group. **Ann Allen Shockley:** Novelist, short story writer, academic librarian, whose latest work is *AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS*, 1746-1933.

Barbara Smith is a Black lesbian-feminist activist and writer. She is editor of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology.* She is also co-founder and current publisher of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

Karen Sjöholm has been given a second chance at life and is exploring the gifts that the world offers.

Sidney Spinster is a homeopathic nurse practitioner who is currently cocreating a healing center in western Mass. for wimmin and girls only. She is looking forward to the tremendous expansion of Lesbian Separatism that will come in the 21st Century.

Sherry Sylvester is one of the women we couldn't find.

Naja Sorella: I'm a 39 yr. old, more Portuguese than anything else, formerly working class presently poor, Lesbian separatist. My chronic illness started in childhood and progressed into a severe disability 8 years ago. For the last several years I've been mostly bedbound with 1-2 hours of energy a day. The loves of my life are my 7 year lover/best friend/life companion Frieda, painting, writing, reading and collecting stones/crystals.

Christina Springer is an African-American lesbian mother, writer and filmmaker. I am the co-founder of Back Porch Productions: A Women's Media Collective whose first film *Out of Our Time* is receiving international attention. A trailer for my screenplay, *Creation of Destiny* has been shot. Some of my work is in *Riding Desire*, an anthology edited by Tee Corinne.

Susan Leigh Star writes about the history and politics of science, knowledge and technology. Her book, *Regions of the Mind: Brain Research and the Quest for Scientific Certainty* (Stanford University Press) was published in 1989. She lives and teaches in England.

Pat Suncircle is one of the women we couldn't find.

Michaele Uccella is one of the women we couldn't find.

Joan Ward is still a lesbian, still a separatist, and still believes everything she wrote in her paper.

Leslita Williams, aka Emma Otter, builds ramps, fixes bicycles, edits, works with herbs. She's survived academia, coalition politix, drugs and the natural foods industry. Now living with Fox-child in beautiful Archer, Florida, and a member of the Archer dyke writers group.

Jennifer Green Woodhull is an old-fashioned radical feminist who works in public radio and practices Buddhism in Juneau, Alaska. She lives with her lover, Sara, and their portly spaniel, Egg.

zana: i'm 44, disabled, jewish, on lesbian land for 11 years. through art, writing and daily living, i celebrate dyke life — and try to figure out how we can do it better, how we can make real alternatives to patriarchy. a collection of my poetry and art, *herb womon*, is available for \$7 (more/less or barter, print or tape) from me at 12150 w. calle seneca, tucson, az 85743. my work right now is to establish land-trust land for disabled lesbians and our allies.

Announcements and Classified Ads_

PUBLICATIONS

LESBIAN BEDTIME STORIES 2 is now out: 30 more great stories of Lesbian humor, warmth and hope. Mention Sinister Wisdom and get both volumes 1 and 2 for just \$19.95 (free postage), or send \$11.50 for either book singly. Satisfaction guaranteed! Tough Dove Books, POB 184, Willits, CA 95490.

MAIZE, A Lesbian Country Magazine. \$10 for 4 issues from Word Weavers, Box 8724, Mpls., MN 55408.

WORD WEAVERS, a Lesbian publisher, offers these classics: *Ripening; Dreaming; Awakening, Lesbian Land, Spirited Lesbians*. Write for brochure: Box 8742, Mpls., MN 55408

BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES, special issue of *SAGE*. Teaching about Black women, analysis of feminist theory, African & African-American writers, & more. Send \$15 (indiv.), \$25 (inst.) for 2-issue sub; \$8 for current issue. Mail check to SAGE, POB 42741, Atlanta, GA 30311-0741.

CONFERENCES and GATHERINGS

THE FOURTH ANNUAL LESBIAN SEPARATIST CONFERENCE AND GATHERING will be held in south central Wisconsin, August 29 -September 2, 1991 FIVE DAYS. Play, talk, argue, spark new friendships, renew old connections, and have fun for a change! Sliding scale registration fee: \$110-175 (scholarship available, write for information). For more information, contact: Burning Bush, PO Box 3065, Madison, WI 53704-0065, USA.

CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

LESBIAN MSS sought. Novel-length fiction, cartoons, comics; upbeat romance, adventure, sci fi, erotica. Responds to queries w/in 8 wks.Guidelines: SASE to Madwoman Press, POB 690, Northboro, MA 01532.

EXLOVER WEIRDSHIT Collection. Funny short fiction, poetry, cartoons by lesbians & gay men. Send w/brief bio, stamped SASE by Sept. 1,1991, to Debra Riggin Waugh (SW), POB 5243, Takoma Park, MD 20913.

AD RATES: Classified: $35 \, \alpha$ a word, \$5 minimum. Display: \$150 page, \$75 1/2, \$60 1/3, \$40 1/4, \$30 2"x2." 10% discount for 3 or more insertions. Deadline for #45: Nov. 1, 1991. Write us for other deadlines, special needs, layout sheet.

LESBIAN THEORY AND PRAXIS ISSUE of SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society. Inter- or multi-disciplinary research, considering race/ethnicity and class, international perspective. Contact Toni McNaron, 207 Lind Hall, 207 Church St. SE, Mpls, MN 55455 (612)625-3363. Submit by Sept.1,1991. Signs, 495 Ford Hall, 224 Church St. SE, U. of MN, Mpls.,MN 55455.

SAGE: A SCHOLARLY JOURNAL ON BLACK WOMEN, seeking essays, personal narratives, and interviews for a special issue on relationships. Deadline Sept.1, 1991. Mss and queries to PO Box 42741, Atlanta, GA 30311-0741.

GAY SIBLINGS ANTHOLOGY: Nonfiction mss. of all types on lesbians and gay men with their gay siblings. SASE to Don and Molly Martin, 1016 E. 7th Ave., Olympia, WA 98501. Deadline July 1, 1991.

ANTHOLOGY ON WRITING AND HEALING seeks poems, short stories, journal entries, prose commentary either written during a time of pain or reflecting on the power of writing to heal. SASE. Deadline August 15. Karen Elias, RD 2, Box 279-C, Lock Haven, PA 17745.

LESBIAN PHILOSOPHY, Special Issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*. Focus on ethics. Send papers by Jan.10,1992 in triplicate to Claudia Card, Dept. of Phil., U. of WI, Madison, WI 53706.

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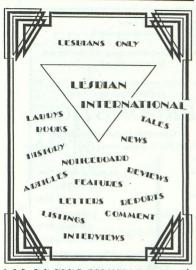
Upcoming Issues

#45 Lesbians & Class. We want to focus on lies about money — in our editorial group we acknowledged that we had all lied about money, though how and why varied dramatically by class. Where do the lies come from? How do we deal with our shame? Our anger? Our bitterness? Are there communities where dykes are actively redistributing resources? After 20 years of personal discussion around class in our movements, have we found any ways to really change the class set-ups we're born into? We urge middle-class and wealthy lesbians to remember that an embarrassment of riches is not the same as the shame of poverty. This issue will particularly address the concerns of working-class and poor lesbians and will be primarily composed of their work. Lesbian Ethics will be putting out an issue on class as well — we hope we have the opportunity to continue discussions started there, as well as present new perspectives. Due out in Dec., 1991.

#46: Lesbians of Color. We're looking for work in all form by all Lesbians of Color. Deadline: October 1, 1991.

#47: Open Theme. Deadline: February 1, 1992.

It's within the realm of possibility that we may change the order of these issues. See inside back cover for details on how to send us your work.



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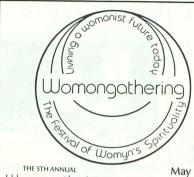
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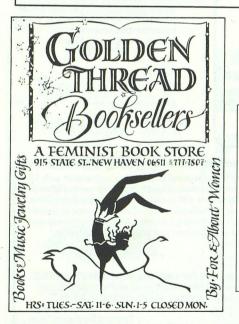
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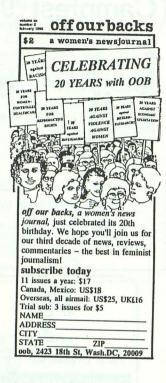
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 Bogus, Warland, Parks-Satterfield, Negrón-Muntaner, Seto, Sapphire, Robson #41/Italian-American Women's Issue. Guest edited by Denise Leto & Janet Capone. • Azpadu, Guido deVries, Tavormina, Capra, fides, Cuomo, Veno, Tornatore •

#40/Special Focus on Friendship. Essays, fiction, editorial discussion transcript. • de la Peña, Hardy, Svirsky, Gray, Stinson, Dambroff, Mi Ok Bruining, Hauptman • #38/Emphasis on Lesbian Relationships. Fiction and poetry.

 Jewell, Clarke, Anzaldúa, Gage, Schaffer, Spisak, Taraba, Devora, Louise, Knight #37/Emphasis on Lesbian Theory. With work on consumerism, spirituality, political

theory, children, racism, anti-Semitism, lesbians in prison.

• Lee, Tallen, Evans, Pratt, Robson, Quinlan, Livia, Hardy, Gray, Green, Justicz • #36/Special Focus on Surviving Psychiatric Assault/Creating Emotional Well Being in our Communities. Includes testimony, prose, poetry and essays on getting locked up, getting out, community, therapy and therapism.

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• Katz, Ortiz Taylor, Hoagland, Allegra, Livia, Louise, Ríos, Danaan, Marah • #33/Special Focus on Wisdom. Lesbians of Color, Non-violence, War Stories, Incest. Leaving a Will, Assimilation, The Real Fat Womon Poems, Coming to Terms.

 Anzaldúa, Ruth, Rich, Chrystos, Kaye/Kantrowitz, Hardy, Gilmore, Brody, Rakusin #32/Special Focus on Illness, Death, Mourning, Healing, the Disappeared, Hunting Season, Dealing with Suicide, Cancer, New Ritual Observances.

 Maia, Allegra, Sears, McDonald, Waters, Hansell, Rosenblum, Butler, Stinson #31/Special Focus on Sex and Fiction, Coming out in the South, Found Goddesses.

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#28/Special Focus on Women & Work; Body Image, Size & Eating.

• Klepfisz, Clarke, Heather, Sturgis, Gould, Boucher, Gomez, Sardella, Moran • #27/Special Focus on Girlhood, Sexuality and Violence, Office Work, Navy Dykes, White Trash, Women of Color/Women in Israel/Women in Lebanon.

• Adnan, Felman, Grahn, Schalet, Bogus, HaMa'avak Touch, Quintanales, Anzaldúa • #26/Special Issue: To Go To Berbir by Jill Drew, a book-length journal written by an American nurse working in Beirut during the 1982 Israeli invasion.

#25/Butch/Fem in the 50's, Native American Roots of White Feminism, Haitian,

Palestinian, Puerto Rican Struggles, Jewish Radical Identity, Welfare Life. Allen, Cotrell, Root, Stecenko, Love, Paz, Smukler, Hall, Lipstadt, Brant

#21/Separatism Revisited, Jewish Survival & Defiance, Black Lesbian Writing, Photos of Dykes in Drag, Suicide, Bars, Letters about Anti-Semitism.

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