

TRIBUTE TO MICHELLE CLIFF

"CREATING ALCHEMY":
ON THE WORK OF MICHELLE CLIFF

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Michelle Cliff

Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich edited eight issues of *Sinister Wisdom*; from 1980 through 1984, together they produced issue 17 through issue 24. Cliff and Rich were the second pair of *Sinister Wisdom* editors. They purchased the magazine from founders, Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines, and moved it to their home in Western Massachusetts. The post office box for *Sinister Wisdom* was in Amherst; Cliff and Rich lived a short distance away in Montague. The two met in New York City when Cliff was a production editor at W. W. Norton, Rich's publishing house, and had not been lovers for long when they took the reins of the journal. In her first "Notes for a Magazine," Cliff began by writing about how "lesbian/feminists must work to rededicate ourselves to a women's revolution." She continued,

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. The historian Blanche W. Cook has said that revolution is a process, not an event. It is a process which requires courage and vigilance. Theory and nourishment. Criticism and support. 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.

In this early articulation of her intentions as editor of the journal, Cliff centers revolution with a distinctively feminist approach. Cliff

articulates the necessities of theory, criticism, and anger, and reminds readers that in addition to these elements, which can be at times fractious, difficult, painful, feminists and lesbians need nourishment, support, and love. As always, reading these words from 1980, I am inspired by the palpable belief in revolution that Cliff expresses and by the method of elaborating what revolution needs in the current moment. The vision she articulates here requires balance; it must be deployed with care.

She concluded "Notes" with these words:

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 I 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.

Cliff's words in this issue provide a rare view into her heavily guarded interior as her literary career was beginning. Persephone Press published Cliff's first essay collection, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, in 1980 as she and Rich began editing *Sinister Wisdom*. Crossing Press published *Abeng* in 1984, as they passed the journal to the next editors Michelle Uccella and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz.

The editorship of Cliff and Rich and the eight issues of the journal that they produced were profoundly influential for *Sinister Wisdom*, lesbian-feminist communities, and Cliff and Rich themselves as writers. They produced *Sinister Wisdom* during a period in the Women's Liberation Movement when journals could source much of the labor for journal production

from women, including printing and typesetting. Cliff and Rich printed the first three issues of *Sinister Wisdom* that they edited and published at New Victoria Printers, a woman-owned press, in Lebanon, NH. They supported Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines, the former editors and publishers of *Sinister Wisdom*, in the development of their typesetting business in Shelburne Falls, MA; Catherine and Harriet provided typesetting and paste up services for *Sinister Wisdom* 20 and *Sinister Wisdom* 21. Beginning with *Sinister Wisdom* 20, they used Iowa City Women's Press and its affiliate A Fine Bind, two women-owned companies, for support publishing the journal. The power of women that Cliff envisioned in her first "Notes for a Magazine" manifested itself as the two published the journal using women's labor and women's businesses.

Together Cliff and Rich published a raft of writers whose names became well-known in feminist and lesbian-feminist circles; often *Sinister Wisdom* was an early or first publications for (lesbian) writers. Cliff and Rich published Donna Allegra, Andrea Dworkin, Judith McDaniel, Willyce Kim, Audre Lorde, Marilyn Frye, Irena Klepfisz, Beth Brant, Judy Grahn, Paula Gunn Allen, Maureen Brady, Lee Lynch, Joanna Russ, hattie gossett, Mab Segrest, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Chrystos, Susan Wood-Thompson, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Deming, Judith Katz, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, wendy stevens, Selma Miriam, Valerie Minor, Joan Nestle, zana, Virginia de Araújo, Jean Sirius, Studie Rakusin, Red Jordan Arobateau, Ann Allen Shockley, Michelle Parkerson, Jean Swallow, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Karen Brodine, Susan Sherman, Cheryl Clarke, Marilyn Hacker, Toi Derricotte, Jacqueline Lapidus, and Joy Harjo. The full series of issues and a database of contributors to issues published by Cliff and Rich as well as all other editors are available online at www.sinisterwisdom.org/archive. In addition to publishing poems, essays, interviews, short stories, reviews, art, and other creative work, Cliff and Rich curated lively

dialogues and debates about separatism and anti-Semitism in the pages of *Sinister Wisdom*.

Perhaps one of the most influential issues published during Cliff and Rich's editorial tenure was *Sinister Wisdom 22/23*, a special double issue edited by Beth Brant. *A Gathering of Spirit: New American Indian Women's Writing (Sinister Wisdom 22/23)* was a crucial articulation of Native American Indian women's writing. For at least three years after the publication of *A Gathering of Spirit*, *Sinister Wisdom* marketed and sold the issue as a *Sinister Wisdom Book*, ensuring that it continued to reach readers. In 1988, Firebrand Books republished it as a trade book. *A Gathering of Spirit* circulated widely and remained in print for many years, influencing generations of readers and writers. There has not been a comparable volume of Native American women's writing since.

In the introduction to the issue, Brant describes pitching the idea for an issue to Cliff and Rich during a visit on New Year's Day in 1982:

We are sitting in their living room. Dinner is over. It has been snowing all day, the white flakes muffle any sound coming from outside. Michelle has lit the oil lamps. The light is warm yellow and soft. We are talking about writing. About women of color writing. I ask if they have 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. I am not an "established" writer. (To this day, I am not sure what those words mean.) I have never edited any work but my own. And I do not have the education. And to me, that says it all. To have less than a high-school diploma is not to presume. About anything.

I do not say these things out loud, only to myself. But I do say polite words--I'm sure someone else

could do a better job, I really don't think I have the time, etc., etc.

Michelle assures me that editing is not a mysterious process. It think it is. Adrienne tells me that they would not consider undertaking such a project. One is Black. One is Jewish. Neither is Indian. So I am caught, asking the inside me, why did I raise this if I wasn't willing to take it on?

This account by Brant reveals not only the texture of her mind and spirit as a writer and editor but also some of the practices of Cliff and Rich as editors. They were open to projects by other women; they demystified the process of editing both by explaining it to writers and potential editors and by creating opportunities for women to edit, and they valued and expressed the political significance of women of color editing and curating work.

Brant does take on the project of editing an issue of *Sinister Wisdom*; Cliff and Rich published *Sinister Wisdom 22/23: A Gathering of Spirit* in 1983. Though it seems that neither woman preserved her correspondence or notes (there is a small archive of Cliff's work at the University of Georgia; Brant's papers are not archived anywhere), I suspect that Cliff and Brant communicated regularly while Brant edited *Sinister Wisdom 22/23*. Cliff and Rich published a letter from Brant to Cliff in *Sinister Wisdom 19* (1982). In the letter, Brant describes her experience at the Women in Print Conference in Washington DC. Dated October 6, 1981, Brant wrote the letter immediately after the conference which was held October 1-4; Brant details both her experiences at the conference and recounts some of the dynamics around race. The letter reveals affection between Brant and Cliff and also the close relationship between the two couples (Cliff and Rich and Brant and her partner Denise Dorsz); Brant writes to Cliff, "I feel so much a part of you and your life" (35), and concludes, "Dearest friend, this letter has been long, you must be tired. I look forward to seeing you soon" (36). The letter seems to gesture to an on-going correspondence

documenting the strength of the friendship and the connection. During the process of creating *A Gathering of Spirit*, which Brant describes delightfully in her introduction as “a flurry of typing, going to the post office, going to the printer, making phone calls, writing more letters,” I imagine Cliff offering reassurance and support to Brant for her work. I imagine the two of them with a relationship of friendship, affection, and comradeship growing through the work of *Sinister Wisdom*. In the acknowledgments, Brant thanked Cliff and Rich “for embracing my idea of an issue devoted to North American Indian women’s writing and art. For helping me give it fruit. For not interfering. For friendship.” These brief lines invite a larger story of friendship and political solidarity within the pages of the journal. While the documents do not exist to tell that story, readers might imagine it in the mind, in the heart.

Cliff’s work in *Sinister Wisdom* was not only editorial. She published two essays in the journal and two book reviews. These four pieces lend insight into Cliff’s creative work and also into the historical moment of her editorship and creative production. Editorial work demands subjectivity that is removed or abstracted from the physical and emotional intimacy of reading a text. Production editors, responsible for copyediting and proofreading as well as overseeing the design and printing of books, encounter texts as words and sentences in need of correcting, corralling, and fixing. Authors live inside a text producing it for readers to enjoy. Editors are first readers with an eye to external readers; they help an author produce a final manuscript. Production editors, the space Cliff occupied in commercial publishing, are responsible for making a book to industry standards; they discipline a text to become an object that anyone picking it up can recognize it as a book, a story, a narrative, even if what is inside it challenges these very ideas and conceptions.

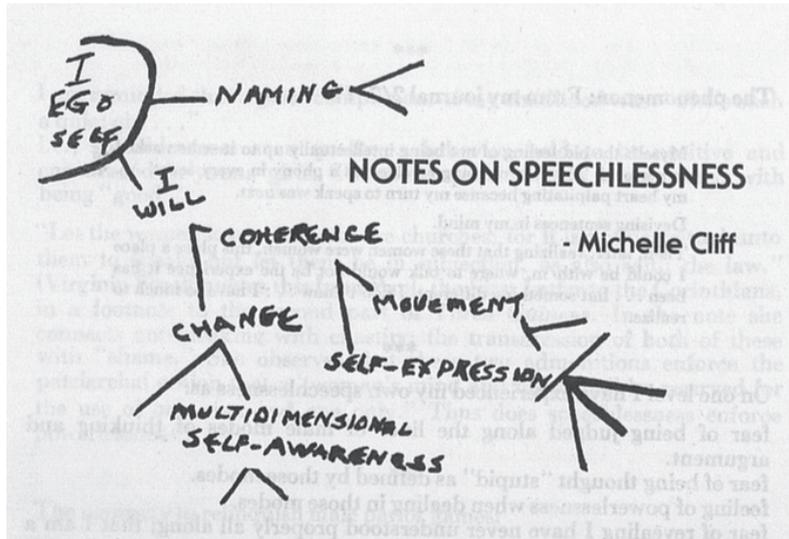
Cliff’s editorial work at W. W. Norton and *Sinister Wisdom* demanded this outside subjectivity, but her work as a creator challenges subjectivity. Cliff’s *oeuvre* of five novels, a short

story collection, and three essay collections demonstrates how colonialism and racism fracture subjectivity. Her early essays in *Sinister Wisdom* capture how these themes germinate in her writing.

“Notes on Speechlessness,” published in 1978 in *Sinister Wisdom* 5, was Cliff’s first essay in the journal. The piece is literally written as notes and the original publication contains a hand-drawn graphic (it is not clear if the graphic was drawn by Cliff or someone else). Reflecting on this essay in the preface to *The Land of Look Behind*, Cliff describes it as

written in snatches on a nine-to-five job. I did not choose the note form consciously; a combination of things drew me to it. An urgency for one thing. I also felt incompetent to construct an essay in which I would describe the intimacies, fears, and lies I wrote of in “Speechlessness.” I felt my thoughts, things I had held within for a lifetime, traversed so wide a terrain, had so many stops and starts, apparent non sequiturs, that an essay—with its cold-blooded dependence on logical construction, which I had mastered practically against my will—could not work. My subject could not respond to that form, which would have contradicted the idea of speechlessness. This tender approach to myself within the confines and interruptions of a forty-hour-a-week job and against a history of forced fluency was the beginning of a journey into speech. (12)

The material conditions of Cliff’s life, working a nine-to-five job shaped her creative work. The broader Women’s Liberation Movement and by her editorship of *Sinister Wisdom* also supported her journey into speech. Cliff’s speech was strengthened and emboldened by the opportunity to publish other writers and nurture their work through *Sinister Wisdom*.



In “Notes on Speechlessness.” Cliff ascribes speechless to a variety of factors, three of which she names: 1. “Being female forced into male modes of thinking and argument”. 2. “Being a lesbian in the same circumstance. Concealing lesbianism and thereby entering a dual masquerade—passing straight/passing lesbian.” and 3. “The symbolic origin of my speechlessness lies in an event of my childhood: the diary-reading.” In this list, Cliff links speechlessness with an analysis of sex, sexual orientation, and past trauma.

In these notes, Cliff not only diagnoses the problems of women’s silences, she also offers some solutions and visions for speech. In the conclusion, Cliff makes this statement for survival:

To not be speechless: to seek those modes of thought and articulation which will assure the unity rather than the division of myself.

To separate out and eliminate those elements which split me.

Those elements which have divided me into mind/body, straight/lesbian, child/adult.

This means nothing more or less than seeking my own language.

This may be what women will do.

The search for a unified self is a quest that Cliff’s protagonists undertake in her novels. The work of seeking her own language, work that unfolds through her writing, also emerges within the pages of *Sinister Wisdom* as Cliff curates a new language by an array of women writes reaching for unity rather than division of the self.

“Anonymity and the Denial of the Self” was the second essay by Cliff published before she and Rich became editors of the journal. “Anonymity and the Denial of the Self” was in *Sinister Wisdom* 9 published in 1979. (A selection of this essay was reprinted in the 15th anniversary issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, *Sinister Wisdom* 43/44; this issue is still available for sale from *Sinister Wisdom*). This essay, in five parts, explores another aspect of speechlessness: speech that is not owned or assigned to women but rather made anonymously. “Anonymity and the Denial of the Self” meditates first on a book about the artistic production of women painters in “an isolated district in India.” The second part of the essay opens with the declaration: “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.” Cliff then explores the meaning of anonymity on “our history (metrology) and our tradition (matriography) and our/selves (matrices).” Here Cliff comes into her power as a writer and analyst. She writes:

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. As women we have been taught, and have internalized the teaching, that we are extensions of others, not our/selves, and we have

been eager to plead for “sweet waters.” By choosing anonymity we are choosing erasure. (65).

Cliff draws into this essay an array of historical sources; Felicia Hemes, Berthe Morisot, Manet, Paula Becker, Artemisia Gentileschi, Romaine Brooks, Maria van Oosterwyck, Kathe Kollwitz, and Suzanne Valadon all make an appearance as Cliff reaches to understand how “to break the constraints of role” and ultimately to expand and reimagine the role of woman.

In the early 1980s in the pages of feminist and lesbian journals, book reviewing was a vibrant political and community practice. Cliff reviewed two books for *Sinister Wisdom*. The first review, published in *Sinister Wisdom* 13 in 1980, was of Joan Gibb’s collection of poetry *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. Cliff praises Gibb’s book as “heroic and powerful” as “diametrically opposed to powerlessness and to speechlessness.” She says, “These are works of politics and anger. Of love and history. Of knowledge and understanding. These are the works of a black lesbian feminist woman who has refused the silences proffered her.” The second review, published in *Sinister Wisdom* 19 in 1982 when Cliff edited the journal, is a review of *This Bridge Called My Back*. (This review is reprinted in *Sinister Wisdom* 43/44). Titled, “Making Soul, Creating Alchemy,” the review quotes extensively from selections of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Cliff reflects on the meaning of the book to her. She describes the book as connecting “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.” Cliff’s review is an early one of *This Bridge*; Cliff’s passion for the book is a harbinger of its extraordinary influence.

In her final Notes for a Magazine, Rich praised Cliff as “the managing and sustaining editor, whose dedication, skill and energy kept the body and soul of *SW* together.” She also noted that it “seemed truly ironic that some correspondents and contributors chose to assume that I was the “real” editor, or the only one.” Cliff wrote that she learned a lot from the years of editing *Sinister Wisdom* and that it was a “good experience, although a complicated one.” One of her key learnings was that “the bottom line is very powerful and that we must address the economics of this movement and how we can survive.” Cliff called for more organizations, “[W]e 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.” She concluded:

We must give of 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.

After Cliff and Rich edited *Sinister Wisdom*, Cliff’s reputation as a novelist grew. Her novels, in particular *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, *Bodies of Water* and *Free Enterprise*, are recognized by readers as beautiful and tender; literary critics praise them similarly and situate them as important post-colonial narratives.

In 2010, I interviewed Michelle Cliff for *Lambda Literary*. The occasion was the release of her new novel, *Into the Interior*. The book, Cliff’s final novel, is challenging; it is an evocative book that relies on pastiche more than narrative. The language is lush yet sparse; the ideas and emotions seem compelling, but it is a difficult book to enter, write about, and understand. My interview with Cliff was challenging as well. I had just begun editing *Sinister Wisdom*; and I imagined a kinship with her because she had

edited the journal. Though of course to say that she had edited the journal is to inadvertently diminish her work. Cliff was a key administrator of the journal at a time when it was booming and had an extraordinary reach. To say *Sinister Wisdom* is to name a journal that a small community of readers know and love; to say, *Sinister Wisdom*, edited during the early 1980s by Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff, is to situate the journal in a pantheon. In preparing to interview Cliff, I realized that what I wanted from Cliff was sisterhood; to state it even more plainly: I wanted to bond with her. What I received were curt email replies. I was solicitous and, I thought, engaging; Cliff felt cool over the few emails we exchanged. In my raft of questions, more questions were left unanswered than answered. Her replies were brief, some even terse. I struggled to produce a piece that highlighted her work, her new book. I was younger then, a star-struck writer who perhaps did not give Cliff all her due. All I know is I wanted something from that interaction that I did not receive. It haunts me. I only write this because Cliff wrote in "Anonymity and the Denial of the Self": "To admit the personal counts is a radical act for a woman (68)." This is my admission of the personal. Our brief email exchanges from 2010, the interview we constructed together, remain, nearly a decade later, uncomfortable (and unsatisfying) encounter. It haunts me. Then I read Cliff's novels; read her contributions to *Sinister Wisdom*. Imagine her labor to make this journal possible. They inspire me. They remind me of my commitments. In "Anonymity," Cliff also writes, "To be a feminist is to attempt the rescue of other women from the various constraints which culminate in anonymity" (70). This dossier is an attempt to rescue Cliff from various constraints.

Michelle Cliff died on June 12, 2016, the same day as the massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL. This tribute to Cliff is fittingly a part of an issue that lifts up political writing by lesbians. Both the work of publishing political writing by lesbians

and recognizing the life and work of Michelle Cliff are crucial to *Sinister Wisdom*. In this dossier on Cliff, you will find contemporary writers responding to the work of Cliff, photographs courtesy of Michelle Cliff's estate, a complete bibliography of her work, and a reprint of her powerful essay on speechlessness.

I offer these words as a tribute to Cliff, in the pages of a journal that continues to publish in part thanks to Cliff's labors many years ago, and I also implore all of the readers of this work, readers who are our subscribers today and readers in the future who might be reading this words in a library, in some new format online or in some type of replica of a book that I cannot yet even imagine, to read more of Cliff's work and engage with it in a meaningful and powerful way. Novels, essays, stories, book reviews. Cliff left an impressive corpus of work that challenges us to think about the world in new ways. This dossier extends an invitation to engage Cliff, to rescue her today and many days in the future "from the various constraints which culminate in anonymity." Each time Michelle Cliff's name appears on the inside cover of an issue of *Sinister Wisdom*, it is a feminist act to challenge anonymity. Take the feminist act of reading Cliff's work. Each time a reader picks up her books, reads her work, it is a feminist act challenging anonymity and speechlessness.