

In these poetic musings on the power of lesbian sex, the insistent naming of race by people of color must continue. In *Sinister Wisdom 15: Lesbianism: Sexuality and Power/ The Patriarchy: Violence and Pornography*, contributors take up key debates of the Sex Wars, particularly the colonization of women's bodies in pornography and the many relationships between sex and power. In this conversation, too, women

writers of color interrupt the centering of whiteness and name the place of race and sex in literary discourse. Luisah Teish's "For Venus DeMilo," for example, questions the place of women of color in these Sex Wars critiques. The speaker asks: "What is my sister's name?... Maria? Ayesha? Reiko? / Como se llama, Hermana? / Josefina, my Columbian cutie / crucified for cinco dineros / on the backdrop of an imported / genuine / American / Snuff-porn film."

These invocations ask us another set of questions: *Whose colonization does our work seek to unwrite? Whose desires do we value and whose lives do we protect? Whose voices will shape our history?*

These questions bring to mind the words of Audre Lorde, in her own reflection on racist erasure in white feminist writing. Lorde's "Open Letter Mary Daly" might serve as a shadow voice in this conversation about the future of race in lesbian literary discourse. Posing this question to Daly directly, Lorde writes: "So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women?... This is not a rhetorical question" (68).\*

This is the question *Sinister Wisdom's* contributors asked each other in 1980, and the one they ask us now.

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\* Lorde, Audre. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. 66-71.

# WRITING RACE, HERSTORICITY, AND THE POWER OF LESBIAN SEX\*

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## FOR VENUS DEMILO

What is my sister's name?  
who wandered armless through the city  
raped and dismembered by a  
gin-stained night?

What is her name?

Maria?

Ayesha?

Reiko?

What is the name of my sister?

To me, as a black queer feminist writer, *Sinister Wisdom* 13, 14, and 15 (all published in 1980) feel like the first breaths of a conversation one might easily encounter today. Sometimes loud and always impassioned, lesbian voices overlap in these issues, sparking moments of contact as they grapple with the intersections of race, gender, and sex. The conversation, like ours, is varied: feminist critics condemn the violent fetishization of lesbian sex in porn. Lesbian poets reflect on the power of our erotic fantasy. White women take each other to task over the erasure of women of color in their feminism. Black lesbians insistently speak themselves into literary history.

The themes of race, sex, and lesbian herstory wind throughout these issues as contributors ask: What is lesbian herstory, and who does it belong to? Whose desires must our writing make visible? What kinds of futures might our fantasies create?



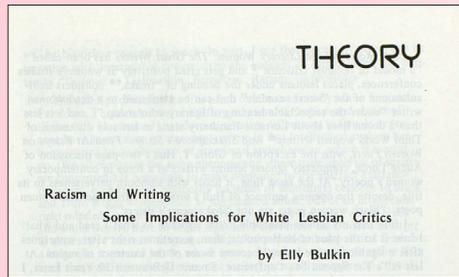
Six Contributors to Conditions: Five (l to r, standing: Hillary Kay, Barbara Smith, Donna Kate Rushin, Fahamisha Sharret Brown, l to r, sitting: Beverly Smith, Brenda Hayward) photograph by Susan Fietschmann

Guest edited by Beth Hodges, *Sinister Wisdom* 13 reflects on the question of visibility in lesbian history, and considers the place of race, sex, and the erotic in this historical arc. The issue opens with Elly Bulkin's essay "Racism and Writing," which becomes a provocative conversation piece linking these three issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. Bulkin critiques racism in a number of feminist texts of the moment, including Mary Daly's 1978 *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, in which Daly introduces a gender-normative history of patriarchy that excludes people of color. Locating her critique from her own perspective as a white woman and "a vocal critic of heterosexism," Bulkin writes of *Gyn/Ecology*: "I was concerned with her use of white Western sources that seemed likely to be... not

just sexist but also racist, and about her avoidance of race and class as substantive issues in her chapter on American gynecology" (10).

In some ways, Bulkin's critiques ring familiar and even refreshing from our contemporary vantage point. One can imagine the "likes" such a tweet would earn today.

\* I use the term "herstoricity" here to signal the important feminist rejection of the term "history" and its gendered linguistic resonances. Herstoricity is the location of people, ideas, texts etc. within (in this case) a feminist vision of time. Throughout the essay, I use the term "history" as well, to gesture to the multiple genders—including queer and trans genders—contained within feminist temporalities. In most cases, I use both terms as interchangeable with "hirstory" and other non-gendered (though less legible) terms.



Bulkin calls for white women to engage in anti-racist consciousness-raising, a “self-education project [that] involves filling the informational, cultural, and general gaps left by years of schooling that either omitted or distorted material about women/people of color” (6). While Bulkin places blame for white women’s racism primarily on structural racism (through “gaps” in education),

she assumes responsibility for addressing such erasures in her own writing, and expects the same of her white women literary peers. On this point, she also expresses her disappointment in other white women’s responses to Daly’s work: “I waited patiently for feminist reviews that would, in some way, reflect my concerns...” (10).

This conversation hints at the feminist literary prehistories of what some now term the “callout”—that genre of public critique that, in its most hopeful iterations, seeks to identify oppressive logics and in public discourse to sharpen collective conversations about oppressive attitudes and/or introduce social consequences for those who propone them.

And Bulkin’s call does, indeed, draw an animated response, which plays out over the subsequent issues of *Sinister Wisdom*. As a whole, the response is also familiar, partly because it also demonstrates the complicated, sometimes messy dialogues callouts can engender, particularly when race is at stake. In *Sinister Wisdom* 14, Adrienne Rich writes a “response” in support of Bulkin’s critique, and anticipates a defensive and misguided response from other white feminists: “I do not believe it was in any sense Elly’s intention to isolate Mary Daly as a sole target or scapegoat of racism among with feminist writers, it would be a great pity for her essay to be read as a form of ‘trashing.’” (104). Quickly, though, Rich turns to her personal familiarity with critiques of racism in her own work, describing how “after my own book, *Of Woman Born*, was published in 1976, I received a number of letters and comments from Black women, criticizing my extremely brief and cursory references to Black motherhood... I had let myself off the hook by telling myself that this was a subject that could only be rightly written about by Black women” (104). Rich offers a moment of public self-reflection and self-critique that demonstrates the beginnings of a solid response to a callout. She considers critiques made of her work, and makes some rhetorical steps toward addressing them (in this case, naming several black women writers whose work she failed to include in her book). She performs this self-reflection by way of example, in hopes that “Elly’s challenging, honest, and thoughtful article will help activate a climate in which every white feminist writer will seek and find the challenge and support she needs to combat her own unconscious racism” (105).

From our contemporary vantage point, it’s clear that these hopes have gone unfulfilled. The erasure of people of color from much of feminist discourse persists, as does the reluctance of many white queer people to take up anti-racism as a central aim of their queer politics. Yet, what is striking to me is the familiar logic with which these calls for white feminist anti-racist self-interrogation are rejected. In *Sinister Wisdom* 15, H. Patricia Hynes writes yet another response to Bulkin. She defends Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, dismissing the criticisms published in previous issues, in which, Hynes writes, “being a mathematician, I sensed the emergence of an arithmetic of

oppression: Homophobia + Racism = Oppression, an equation whose correctness is measured by its containing the proper factors of addition” (105). Using this “mathematical” logic, Hynes deduces that such a critique of white lesbian racism “is both technically incorrect and substantively imprecise. It does not include the oppression of ageism, classism, and the handicapped” (105).

Reader, I hollered! What anti-racist feminist today has not come across a similar moment, when the vast range of linked oppressions is invoked not to critique intersecting structures of power (for example, the mutual imbrication of ageism, ableism, and xenophobia), but to deflect from discussions of race. Such misappropriations of what we now term intersectionality run widespread in both popular and academic conversations in our contemporary moment, in which the fact of, as Hynes puts it, “an infinite variety of specific oppressions,” is used to silence women of color and allow racism to go unchecked.

But to my mind, it is the interplay of art and criticism that makes *Sinister Wisdom* the wonderfully queer archive it is. The poetry, fiction, and interviews in these issues offer context for debates race and representation. They also draw connections to closely connected questions of sex, fantasy, and the creative construction of lesbian herstorcity that animate feminist discourse of the moment. In *Sinister Wisdom* 13, Ruth Farmer’s reflections on the historic *Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue* names this intervention through a discussion of the magazine’s focus on black lesbian literature. Considering the issue’s interruption of white-centered visions of lesbian literature, Farmer shows “why this issue is so badly needed: to help end the silence of Black women, to help make Black Lesbian writers more visible.” (52). Likewise, Michelle Cliff’s review of Joan Gibbs’s *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and Harriet Desmoines’s review of Lorde’s *The Black Unicorn*, also in *Sinister Wisdom* 13, do similar work, naming what Desmoines terms the “essential knowledge” that black women and women of color offer to lesbian and feminist literary herstory—knowledge dismissed by the vision of feminism Daly and Hynes defend. In both Cliff’s and Gibbs’s pieces, we hear the familiar frustration of having to state what should be infuriatingly obvious, both then and now: “that there are Black Lesbians alive and writing and talented enough to be read” (Cliff 52).

This familiarity, too, is crucial for contemporary readers; it reminds us to remain, in Cliff’s words, “aware that knowledge of the past is necessary for change,” an important call for feminists interested in undoing the erasure of women of color today (58).

*Sinister Wisdom* 13’s reflections on lesbian herstorcity resonate perhaps most clearly in Beth Hodge’s interview with Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel on their work with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Here, Nestle and Edel remark on the intimate practice of archiving, and the close skin it shares with writing. As Nestle puts it, “there is a loneliness to being the cherisher of everyone else’s voice. We have our own voices that we sometimes want to express” (103-4). The poets in the following issue, *Sinister Wisdom* 14, echo this longing and make space for the kind of expressive herstorcity Nestle calls for, centering lesbian fantasy as a source of power and thus making the erotic visible. For example, in Lorie Dechar’s poem “Transformer: Love Poem for a Vibrator,” the speaker uses the titular implement of sexual pleasure to remind herself of her body’s own force and capacity: “I’m rising / on a thread of steel / wired / to a hundred tons / of water... I hold the spin / as long as I can stand” (43). Similarly, Joan Larkin, in her poem “A Taste,” figures the lesbian erotic as both enduring sensory pleasure and a pathway to a more complete future: “the taste: lush unripe teasweet salt-sour/suck of wholeness I don’t tire of” (70).