

# CHOOSING LOVE

Natalie Eleanor Patterson

Summer 2022

Michelle Cliff, writing in *Sinister Wisdom* 17's "Notes for a Magazine" as she and Adrienne Rich assumed editorship of *Sinister Wisdom*, noted that she was thinking "about the ways lesbian/feminists must work to rededicate ourselves to a women's revolution." She continued: "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." Audre Lorde also famously said in 1988, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." But what does it mean to choose love?

Barbara Macdonald wrote about feeling othered because of her age at a "Take Back the Night" march in her essay "Look Me in the Eye," published in *Sinister Wisdom* 16 in advance of the publication of the iconic book with the same title. One of the organizers wondered if Barbara would be able to keep up with everyone else. It was at a feminist gathering, ostensibly for all women, that she felt like an outsider. Cynthia Rich, Barbara's partner, observes at the beginning, "because the night is our time of greatest fear, a time when many women are confined to their homes for fear of attack on the street, we march at night to say together, we will fight out fear, we will take back the night." So Barbara marches, despite what the organizer says. She chooses to continue. Choosing love over fear becomes a revolutionary act.

Barbara wrote, "I was tired and distrustful of a woman's movement that seemed to feel everyone's oppression but mine, and I wondered why in the hell I was there." Barbara's experience four decades ago



Tee Corinne: "Self-Portrait Collage for my 37th birthday"

"In it I am (top left to bottom right) 23, 31, 34, and 36 in the background picture."

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## Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal

[www.SinisterWisdom.org](http://www.SinisterWisdom.org)

Anticipating *Sinister Wisdom's* Croning in 2026; Part 6 of 10.

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reminds us today of the many intersecting factors that contribute to alienation from our communities and from ourselves. In “On the Edge of the Fringe,” Sandy Covahey states the question more pointedly: what is true liberation? In this and in many other feminist writings from *Sinister Wisdom*, contributors write about class issues, anti-lesbianism, otherness in the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the pain and isolation that arises when capitalist systems collide with tenuous community ties. Then, as now, we have let women drift. We have also let ourselves drift.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai’s poem addresses being alone in the darkness. “Taking Back My Night” in *Sinister Wisdom* 17 further expands themes that suffused contributors’ writing in the 1981 issues of *Sinister Wisdom*: fear, loneliness, otherness. It makes you wonder how any queer woman survived during such a time of peril. The speaker of Moirai’s poem doesn’t exactly offer an answer, but rather a reaffirmation of voice, of possibility. Consider these lines:

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.

She owns her words, her *I*. A choice has been made, and that choice is love. Of course, it is not as simple as it sounds. Moirai writes, “I am still *learning to love* myself.” [emphasis mine] This effort towards self-love—and the decision to choose to learn how to love—is directly tied to the love that binds queer women, romantically, sexually, and otherwise. Joanna Russ wrote in “Power and Helplessness in the Women’s Movement” in *Sinister Wisdom* 18 that “self-suppression amounts to the death of the self.” When you continually deny your self its right to exist and be loved, that selfhood is at risk of disappearing entirely. Choosing to love oneself—or to learn how to do so—is to love oneself not just because of the self but because that self is a woman.

Queer women have a history of choosing to love each other in times of danger, of “night.” *Sinister Wisdom* 16’s introduction by Robin Ruth Linden, “Sex Is Always the Headliner,” makes this clear. Linden writes about the anti-racist prison resistance movement, stereotypes about incarcerated women, and the homophobia that made lesbians’ lives in prison even worse. Karlene Faith, she wrote, was a community activist who worked with men and women in the California criminal justice system. When she interviewed women in prison, sexuality was an ongoing matter of discussion: “What they wanted, simply, was for their own truths to be told.... Prisons frustrate every natural human need.” Women were labeled in their administrative files as homosexuals (based on personal history, gender presentation, or even just rumor), and many women faced disciplinary consequences if caught showing love for each other. An important theme emerged in these interviews: “Often, the emergence of self accompanies newly discovered intimacy with other women.” Several women expressed a newfound joy with themselves and their womanhood after sharing love with other women in prison. In her journal, Faith wrote, “People die from not being loved.”

When it comes to love, there are a thousand choices we can make. Looking back on classic issues of *Sinister Wisdom*, I have realized that it is impossible to “take back the night” alone, or to weather our perils alone. We must do it together—together with other queer women, and together with our own selves. The night is less dark when we choose love. And to choose love is to choose community, history, and ultimately hope and healing. Maybe it doesn’t *sound* simple—but it is.

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