



This issue is for Barbara Grier (Gene Damon), who wrote sixteen years for *The Ladder*, editing it four of those years while averaging sixty letters a day to isolated lesbians across the country; who gathered the most complete bibliography of lesbian literature available; who knows with such clarity the importance of lesbian writing and publishing to our lives: "There are many women to find, many lesbians to write about and for. We are the women to do this...We have to go out on hills and listen for the wild sweet singing of our past and record it for our future." (*Grier to Lesbian Writers' Conference, Chicago, 1975.*)

Beth writes: "I know you're a legend but I don't get choked up over legends. What moves me is the woman Barbara: not-very-humble, not-so-patient, but infinitely generous. For twenty years you've been encouraging lesbian writers and lesbian readers by sharing your time, your love, your energy, your knowledge. Thank you, dear Barbara. Your life blesses us all."

-Beth, Catherine, Harriet

-photo: Donna McBride

# SINISTER WISDOM

---

VOLUME I, ISSUE 2

FALL, 1976

---



SPECIAL ISSUE: LESBIAN WRITING and PUBLISHING

EDITED by BETH HODGES

Catherine Nicholson  
Harriet Desmoines, editors

Special Thanks to: Charlotte Lesbian Center

Cover graphic by Marianne Lieberman

# CONTENTS

The Old Days	<i>Audre Lorde</i>	4
TRANSFORMATIONS:	<i>Susan Griffin</i>	6
	<i>Deena Metzger</i>	10
AESTHETICS:		
Drawing	<i>Marianne Lieberman</i>	19
Lesbians and Literature (MLA Panel)	<i>June Arnold, Sandy Boucher, Susan Griffin, Melanie Kaye, Judith McDaniel</i>	20
The New Tradition	<i>Bonnie Zimmerman</i>	34
Lesbian Fiction	<i>June Arnold &amp; Bertha Harris</i>	42
Fear of FLYING?	<i>Julia Penelope Stanley</i>	52
REVIEWS: Collage of Criticism		64
Lesbian Literature and the Sexual Revolution	<i>Pat Califia</i>	67
Drawing	<i>Tee Corinne</i>	71
Housework	reviewed by <i>Jacqueline Lapidus</i>	73
After Touch	reviewed by <i>Melanie Kaye</i>	77
periods of stress	reviewed by <i>Susan Sherman</i>	81
lover	reviewed by <i>Julia Willis</i>	87
In Her Day	reviewed by <i>Deborah Core</i>	88
Of Woman Born	reviewed by <i>Joan Larkin</i>	89
POLITICS OF PUBLISHING: Photographs		92, 93
The Politics of Publishing	<i>Jan Clausen</i>	95
The Naiad Press	interview by <i>Barbara Grier</i>	116
The Women's Press Collective	interview by <i>Harriet</i>	120
Letter from the Editor	<i>Beth Hodges</i>	122
Letter to Beth	<i>Harriet &amp; Catherine</i>	126
Recent Lesbian Titles from Feminist Presses		131
Contributors' Notes		134
Questionnaire	<i>Susan Saxe</i>	130

---

Published three times a year  
Individual subscriptions: \$4.50  
Institutions: \$9.00  
Single copies, No. 1 & 3: \$2.00  
Single copy, No. 2: \$2.50  
3116 Country Club Drive  
Charlotte, N.C. 28205

Copyright © SINISTER WISDOM 1976. (Note: We shall never sign over rights to reproduce any part of this magazine in the non-feminist press. The right of copy on all individual pieces, however, is reserved to the author.)

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. All along I had expected this issue of *Sinister Wisdom* to be a sequel to the *Margins* issue I edited in August, 1975--that is, reviews of lesbian-feminist writing. When the articles began coming in, they were many and they were good. There seemed no way to select among them until Jan Clausen offered "The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community." Since Jan's article dealt with a crucial question for writers, publishers and presses, it became the focus for an entire section of the magazine.

When I received permission to include the MLA panel, it became a natural focus for a section of in-depth articles concerning lesbian aesthetics and criticism: *does "lesbian writing" exist? if so, what is its unique character?*

Another focal point was my interest in the connections and convergences in the thinking of all of us--and how such convergences transform our lives and hence our writing. So I asked several writers to speak to this point, and their response became the first section of the magazine.

The review section of this issue, unlike the *Margins* of a year before, is *not* comprehensive. Reviews are few and primarily of the most recent or least reviewed lesbian fiction and poetry.

There is no mention of drama or of lesbian biography (the decision to cut out biography hurt most because we lost Elly Bulkin interviewing Susan Griffin and Frances Doughty's brilliant piece on Margaret Anderson). Although lesbian and feminist magazines publish much of the newest, most exciting lesbian writing, space limitations (which were really *money* limitations) precluded the serious consideration they deserve.

Still, despite its limitations, we are pleased with the issue. We feel that the variety of views expressed here by lesbian writers is representative of the variety that exists. And 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.

Both Hodge

## THE OLD DAYS

Every one wants to know  
how it was in the old days  
with no sun or moon  
in our colourless sky  
to warn us  
we were not insane  
only the harsh searing eye  
of unblinking madwomen and men  
calling our star a ZOO  
and I have no bride to recall  
only many women who whisper  
I was always virgin  
because I never remained.

I remember you only through the eyes  
of all the forgotten others  
on Monday a cat in the sorceresses' alley  
screeched out your death  
in another years language  
and I had forgotten  
your name  
like a promise of hunger  
trapped into mornings  
alone.

Every one wants to know how  
it was  
in the old days  
when we kissed stone into dust  
eternally hungry  
paying respect to the crippled earth  
in silence and in tears  
surely one star fell as the mountain  
collapsed over our bodies  
surely the moon blinked  
once  
as our vigils began.

-Audre Lorde

*"We are discovering the way the world is, not  
what we have been told it is, and to the extent  
we hit the mark we share vision."*

-Pamella Farley

**CONVERGENCES  
TRANSFORMATIONS**

## susan griffin

I want to send you something rough--not unworked, unthought, but rough, showing, as Eva Hesse once wrote, "the mark of the hand." First, it seems to me that the convergences we notice, the ones that excite us, *are* transformations, and that transformations are transformational. We are a community of those coming to speech from silence. This is an elementary fact we share--a history of illiteracy, suffocations, spiritual and literal, burnings of body and work, the weight of the inutterable surrounding all of our lives. And in no way can this shared history be separated from what we write today, nor from our love of each others' voices. Tillie Olsen has written two pieces of work transformational to me on the subject of silence: "Silence, When Writers Don't Write" and "Tell Me a Riddle." (The one about the silences of writers and literature, the other, the story of a life robbed of speech, singing at its end.) And today, I read, with recognition, in Ellen Moers' *Literary Women*, this sentence: "Nevertheless, in their shared commitment to voicing the unheard, Sand and Gaskell appear to stand together as women writers. They shared that heightened feminine sense of the preciousness of language to those who are self-taught, who only yesterday, in the case of women and *le peuple* both, had no voice." And on the same page, Moers quoting Sand: "oblivion is a stupid monster that has devoured too many generations...Escape oblivion...Write your own history, all of you who have understood your life and sounded your heart. To that end alone I am writing my own..."

This week I have been reading and writing about the humus, and about all the delicate cycles which keep the soil alive--the passage of nitrogen through air, plant, soil, micro-organism, the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, the intricacy of the relations of living things. (And of course, there was a theory in 19th century patriarchy that the soil was dead. A fixed, stable reliability.) And I have been thinking that indeed thought, too, especially in the twentieth century, and most specifically the study of literature, and even literature itself has been treated as dead. The universal. The classic. The major writer. The standard. The eternal form. And like all dead things, this version of literature has been separated from all that sustains the living, from intricate relations with other living forms. So, for instance, in this old patriarchal study of writing, we never encounter the question (let alone the answer) why does this writer write? Yet, this question is central to all our writing now.

Why we write, as feminists, is not separable from our lives. We have woven together a kind of textured echo chamber, a flexible moving acoustical system, the new sounds we utter changing the space even before we hear each syllable. Our writing, our talking, our living, our images have created another world than the man-made one we were born to, and continuously in this weaving we move, at one and the same time, toward each other, and outward, expanding the limits of the possible. (But this paradox of the nature of movement is reflected in the universe.) And whatever faith I have in existence, I feel most acutely in my writing and in my love for other women, and it is out of these reasons that I write: How I love clarity and how I love women who are thinking clearly about *our condition*.

From the beginning this movement involved personal transformation as part of a recognition of political circumstance: And yes, this was for me too a starting point of terrible transformation, meeting with a group of women, not raising our consciousness so much as piercing through the language we had been given to find hidden realities, testimonies, each utterance allowing all of us more vision, until finally we found ourselves using the power of our minds, turning this inward vision outward. From the shared experience to the vision of how things are.

But this is not an easy movement: the pure terror for instance, of recognizing how deeply ingrained is rape in the male concept of male sexuality. How far flung and far back the practice. How our daily lives are salted with threats of violence. To live with this insight. (Even after my own work on rape several years ago, reading Susan Brownmiller's book kept me in a continual state of shock for days.) One cannot keep such a vision to herself. One could not even visualize it fully alone; we first began to speak of the reality of rape together, we saw the signs of woman-hating together, almost holding hands, like children in a dark house. And now we live with the ghosts we have routed. The old punishments and the old lessons we force into consciousness. Mother-hatred, self-hatred, fear and awe of the fathers. And we do battle, not only with the ghosts of patriarchy within us, but with reality again: we see men are still in power, and to survive we transform, re-tell old stories, listen, hear again.

This is a kind of bravery, and I am in love with this quality, and this affirmation, *Do you see what I see?* And there is joy in these shared perceptions and a kind of healing.

Listening to the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, I am made aware of the redemptive quality of history, how deep the need to restore our past, how deep the need to *transform* our past. I had written (in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring*

*Inside Her*, a long prose-poem work I am near completing) a piece called "Her Body," a recounting of tortures (in the name of cure or cosmetics) to the female body in patriarchy. Now, as a curative response to that section, I write a piece called *The Years*, naming parts of the body as our history, our resistances to torture. "History" is the hair of this body of resistance:

#### HISTORY

"We begin to see that so far from being inscrutable problems, requiring another life to explain, these sorrows and perplexities of our lives are but the natural results of natural causes, and that, as soon as we ascertain the causes, we can do much to remove them."

-Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world."

-*Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*,  
Seneca Falls, 1848

Fine light hairs down our backbones. Soft hair over our forearms. Our upper lips. Each hair a precise fact. (*He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to franchise. He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no choice.*) Hair tickling our legs. The fact of hair against skin. The hand stroking the hair, the skin. Each hair. Each cell. (*He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead.*) Our hair lying against our cheeks. The assemblage of facts in a tangle of hair. (*He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns. He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.*) Hair rounding our vulvas. How continual are the signs of growth. How from every complexity single strands can be named. (*He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women.*) Hair curling from under our arms. How tangles are combed out and the mysterious laid bare. (*He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself...*) Hair which surprises us. Each hair traces its existence in feeling. (*...claiming it his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God.*) Which betrays our secrets. The mysterious becomes the commonplace. Each hair in the profusion has its own root. (*He has*

endeavored in every way he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers...) Hairs grow all over our bodies. Profusion is cherished. Profusion is unraveled. Each moment acquires identity. Each fact traces its existence in feeling. (...to lessen her self-respect...) We are covered with hair. The past reveals itself as a story we might have lived. The past is cherished. (...and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.) We stroke our bodies; we remark to each other how we have always loved the softness of hair.

Transformational works, conversations, acts, lives, the list could go on. Mary Daly writing of process. Virginia Woolf of Shakespeare's sister (but even more of her own mother). Judy Grahn writing, speaking these lines, "I will not shut my mouth against you./ do you not turn away your shoulder./ we who grew in the same bitters/ that boil us away/ we both need stronger water./ we're touched by a similar nerve." Adrienne Rich, "A dream of tenderness/ wrestles with all I know of history/ I cannot now lie down/ with a man who fears my power/ or reaches for me as for death/ or with a lover who imagines/ we are not in danger." This list could continue indefinitely.

I remember a scene from a film (taken from a novel by Bertolt Brecht) called *The Shameless Old Lady*. In this film, an old woman, after the death of her husband, changes her life completely, sells all her kitchenware, refuses to live with her children, befriends a young prostitute, stays up nights with a group of men and women drinking and talking, and finally, just before her death, takes off in a new automobile to tour the south of France with her young woman friend. Two scenes in this film are, for me, unforgettable. In one, a man, a shoe repairman and the intellectual of this nightly drinking group, holds a book before his assembled friends and reads from it a passage about the collective nature of thought. That no one really ever conceives an idea alone, that thought has a social genesis. One of the men in the group challenges him, protesting that he is not reading this but is making up the passage from his own mind. The shameless old lady looks on approvingly at the dialogue, delighted by all this talk, such an isolation has her life been before.

The other scene I love is a brief silent moment during which one of the women (the younger or the older, I can't remember which) brushes the other's hair.

And one other scene. This from a film I want to see. It is a film made by a woman about two women who live together. This is a scene from their daily lives. It is a film about the small daily transformations which women experience,

allow, tend to, and which have been invisible in this male culture. In this film two women touch. In all ways possible they show knowledge of what they have lived through and what they will yet do, and one sees in their movements how they have survived. I am certain that one day this film will exist.

---

## deena metzger

Dear Beth,

Here is an excerpt--or rather a collage--from *The Book of Hags*...I think it holds together and illuminates the issue of both "transformational works" and "simultaneous discovery"--and perhaps the source of the two...communal internal reality...which is not a contradiction in terms... but a recognition of the fact that our inner life is our common life--or as Virginia Woolf said it--"our real lives are our common lives." In this case there were two transformational events--*MEMOIRS OF A SURVIVOR* which I had not read as well as *THE FOUR-GATED CITY* which I also had not read.--as well as a death shared, taken in, treated as, experienced as if it had happened to me or allowing Arda's experience (she is my dearest friend) to happen to me as if I were she...the point is...that as we explore and appreciate and develop our differences--as we travel into the inner reality--we meet each other...we discover, rediscover, invent and create and affirm our common reality.

Deena

Somewhere on an island on a rocky coast a woman is writing alone. The island is very bare. The rocks are composed of sandstone and disintegrate when anyone attempts to climb them. It is impossible to get a foothold. Maybe they are not sandstone. But they are a yellow stone. And the sun makes them appear even more yellow. Hay colored. Dry hay. Or wheat. No corn. It is a bare coast. Forbidding. Hot. Dry.

The woman is writing a journal. She is the last or almost the last. For years the women have been dying. One by one. Stricken in their youth or middleage. Just as things were beginning. An unknown assassin. Just at the moment when everything was possible. Education, power, consciousness, self. They sickened and died. That is not true. They did not die of their own accord. Something sickened them and they died. They were murdered. Stricken. Poisoned. Assassinated. Suddenly. The doctors call it cancer. It is. But of what nature? And why now? And why so many? And so young?

Somewhere on an island with a rocky coast a woman is writing alone. She is writing in a journal which she calls Alma. Or she is writing a letter to a woman called Alma.

Somewhere on an island with a gentle coast a woman is sitting alone. The beach is deep and soft, bordered with dark trees and palms. The trees cast sharp black shadows on the sand. Black and yellow. Deep yellow. Sunflowers. Tigers. Her name is Alma.

She is an old woman, so dry and twisted and thin, there is no place for death to hold on to her. The sun seems to have sucked all the wet life out of her leaving a husk grating against the ground.

There are two women, one is named Ana and the other is Alma and this is their book or the book Ana is writing or what remains to us of it...or an invasion.

There have been three kinds of death essentially. Death by hunger, death by cancer and death by madness. Everyone who says it is a plot is executed or incarcerated or committed. So there are four types of death essentially. Death by hunger, death by cancer, death by madness--and murder.

And there is resistance. And memory. And there are survivors.

You must remember that what is discussed here has to do initially only with women. The men have been shooting themselves for years. It is not surprising to come across a body lying in the street with a hole in it, flat and black as a punctured tire. Or in a field. Or under a bomb. But the women began dying mysteriously...

When I write these words, I am afraid. I didn't intend these words. I do not know where they emerge from. Whose are they? Who is speaking?

The demon is at the throat. The heart pounds. The words appear unbidden on the page...

"This is the book I would write if I were to die in a year."

Dear Doris Lessing:

A woman was writing a novel about which she knew almost everything and which had been planned in her mind for several months, maybe even a year. It was a simple book about voices. One winding into another...women's voices and how we talked to each other and the new sweetness which was an old sweetness which we shared...

Then Ana appeared. She named herself. Implanted herself in the book. Took over.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am on an island," she answered, "and I am a survivor."

When I read those words, I shivered. I had been thinking about survivors since I had seen those trees, thousands of years old, struck by lightning and burned from the genitals down to the roots, Sequoias, survivors, trees like women whose feet, branches, leaves, bark have been destroyed by fire, peeled, undressed, stripped by fire, devoured by fire within and without, and who nevertheless survive.

This is not the book I intended to write. In June, I began this book. In October, Aurora died. She opened her legs and death entered her body before she could cry out. She had not learned to make the sounds which ward off death. She pulled up her legs exactly as she had when giving birth, and death entered instead.

I had thought this was to be a book on conversation, woman-talk, but Ana came and I began to write a book on death and madness instead.

Ana appears. She writes doggedly from her yellow island. I write also. We match each other in intensity, fighting over the bones of our lives. What belongs to whom? I try to let Ana speak...she has ten years on me, she knows how this comes out. She writes and writes. "After all," she declares, "how many times do we have to say it...we are not writing for entertainment; we are writing for our lives."

I had started the novel in June. Earlier, I wrote to you, inviting you to a conference. There, after the speakers, a young dancer who could only speak in a whisper came to the stage and began speaking in a voice which we could barely hear, pointing to her throat, the gesture of one making a flower with her fingers, opening and closing, where if we looked, we could see a rose or a thorn. "I had been silent for thirty years. I never spoke. I had cancer here in the throat where the words lodged, eating the life away with acid claws. The hole enlarged in my throat and wouldn't heal. The day I was scheduled to have it burned away, I bought a blank book and began to write..."

Until now I have been afraid to tell this story, not knowing who it belong to and in whose interest it was shared.

I call my friend Arda. "In the morning," I tell her, "I don't recognize myself. I am someone else. When I speak, I don't recognize my voice. I don't know who I am. I am saying things I have never said before."

"I didn't recognize Aurora's voice," Arda says huskily. "When I went to see Aurora, I didn't recognize her, her face distorted into a moon. If I didn't know what bed she was in, I would have walked by without turning, had she called me. There was someone else in her bed who called herself Aurora, so I talked to her as if she were my friend. Death came at night. In the transition from woman to star to planet, the body distends and we do not recognize ourselves."

"If I can't recognize myself, then what can I rely on?"

"Look," Arda says, "you are going through this birth mildly. You are not dying of cancer, you don't have to kill your body in order to live...you are not making such a terrible war upon yourself...it is not a struggle to the death, but only a painful birth. Let Ana go, let her free. Let her say what she needs to say."

"But now there are two of them. There is Ana and then there is Alma."

"Let them be," Ana insists.

"Ana," I say, "Ana and Anna Wulf and Anubis. The jackal-headed guide. Do you remember, Arda, when I went away after having started the novel, long after Ana arrived and implanted herself, I read *The Four-Gated City* and discovered that Martha was the survivor. I read the book through the night. There was a storm, the electricity failed and I lay in the dark for hours, conjuring the presence of Martha nee Anna. They are the same in part. I lay in the dark with my heart pounding, wondering about the invader who had entered my novel, who bore a name I could not ignore, who had learned something in another life, another book, about such entrances.

"I do confess, I was afraid.

"When I returned, Arda, I opened the newspaper and read that Lessing had written a new book. Can you guess...?"

"I can't," Arda says, shaking her head but looking directly at me.

*"Memoirs of a Survivor."*

"Is it your book she's written? Have you read it?"

"No. I can't. Not yet. Not until Ana finishes. But it is about a woman who is a survivor after everything breaks down, according to the review. It is not unlike my book."

Arda looks at me severely. "Well, it's clear, isn't it. We don't write our books, we just take them in from the air. They speak through us. We are simply mediums shaken by the terrible words which are spoken through us."

"But I wanted to write about us, the strong parts which act against the death and rape and madness."

"Hmmm, you've added rape," Arda notes, looking down.

"Why not?" I ask her, "since I'm thinking about that too and making lists and gathering statistics. One out of three now dies of cancer, almost everyone I meet has been raped, five out of nine in my last class had been institutionalized for madness. Rape. Cancer. Madness. Rape. Cancer. Madness. This is not what I want to write about. I want to write about us and all I find is death and madness. The Book repeats itself; the words repeat themselves. I no longer finish a sentence but that I write it again and then again. And finally all I can do is write death and madness, death and madness, death and madness across the page.

"Do it," she says.

"I began to write," the dancer said, "to allow the words which had accumulated in my throat to spill onto the page. They came in strange grunts, shapes, grimaces, at first, which I am just coming to recognize. The important thing," she hoarsely whispered, "is to speak. Is to speak. Don't be afraid to speak. Silence is death," she said.

In the beginning when I first discovered who Ana was, I wanted to silence her...to pull her words from the page. Now I let her write; I give her paper upon which to type. I will not be the one to refuse her words. As long as she writes, we can hear her, as long as we listen, she is alive. She is a survivor. Soon there will be many of us.

I must ask you--do I have the right to Ana--as I asked Arda if I had the right to Aurora.

This is the end, in its way, of the letter.

"Do I have the right to record this? Do we have the right, Arda, to make such use of each other? To write it down when it is not ours to begin with. When it is your dead, not mine."

The truth is, it is not clear to me who is Ana and who am I. Sometimes I laugh at myself for worrying about it. After all, Ana knows better than I that it is necessary to give up false divisions. She laughs at me for these separations. Ana is older and wiser. Knows something I don't know. Yet the same questions crop up repeatedly in my mind. What belongs to me? What belongs to her? What is mutually ours? I ask these questions again and again and I hear her laughing.

When I sit here at the typewriter, I tremble to shake voices off me. Is this a real story or fiction, 'If it is real,' the publishers say, 'it cannot be used.' Am I permitted then to write only what you might have said, but didn't. I can't. You get in the way. I remember our conversations. How you looked. What you said. Any resemblance to characters living or dead, alas, or dead, or dead or dying or going mad or mad...is not coincidental. Any resemblance is unavoidable. Every resemblance is inevitable.

What is it that I know, Arda? How to take in a life so that it is mine. I take you in. And Ana also. But there is always the moment of humiliation from loving so much.

"When I stayed with you in the hospital the summer your father was dying, when I sat with you, day and night for an entire summer, neglecting my children, if that is neglect to take someone else's dead into herself like one's own... that summer, Arda, did you think less of me?"

"When Aurora was dying, you were afraid of being invaded, Dinah. You were afraid I would pull you down, that we would go into the pit together. Once when I went to see Aurora, you held me in your arms, crying because I couldn't cry, then you said sternly, "don't make a myth of this!"

"I was embarrassed to love you so much."

Every morning we take the paper into the kitchen in order to read the deaths. We turn the pages. We begin the day.

"A friend said that I reminded him of a woman whose body was falling apart and whose soul stuck awkwardly through the holes in the flesh. I imagined flesh puckering out of a hole in a stocking just above the run. Or the breast peeking obscenely through the blouse when the infant turns away. Or the fat at the waist which folds over the belt. The women he meets these days do not dress properly, and I least of all. He turned away."

"Let it go. Be kind."

"Kind! To whom? He doesn't deserve it."

"To yourself."

"But I'm doing it again, putting his words in the book. Recording someone else. Why does it matter so much? Why don't I know how to be casual about another life?"

"You're relentless."

"A soul snatcher. Look, I told you, I don't mind the pain of caring. I don't mind mourning. I don't mind grief. I can bear that. I mind the sanctions against it. The stigma. I always hear a voice mocking me: 'can't you live your own life?'"

"It isn't only mine," Arda answers.

"No. It has never been only yours."

"Nor Elizabeth's, Leyva's, Tamara's, nor Aurora's. It didn't only belong to Aurora. Imagine if she had died and it had not made a difference. Imagine, if it didn't matter."

"When his friend died suddenly, we talked about it for a moment. Then he returned to his work."

"He had no words, Dinah, don't you see he was born without language for such moments."

"It isn't my voice which mocks you. It wasn't Tamara's voice which mocked you. When you rode with her in the ambulance, when her heart was too heavy to beat steadily, she didn't say, 'live your own life. I have nothing to do with you.'"

"When Tamara was struck, she went gray and said, 'I have a terrible pain in my heart.' But when I looked at her chest, even opening her blouse, I couldn't see the pain. I looked for it, but it didn't even cast a shadow. She had to tell me where and how and even then I couldn't feel it. When you were sick, Arda, and almost died, I was swimming far away in a river and you were fighting for your life...I can't bear that separation. I have nightmares of how it doesn't matter when someone dies. A man falls in the street; traffic continues. A woman stumbles or screams; the conversations interrupt, one looks around, then continues..."

"When Aurora died," Arda whispers, "her face shone like the moon. The spirit had finally broken through the body which had held it prisoner. The body died, it's true, but her spirit hovered translucent before my eyes. I didn't turn away. I only wished it had emerged sooner, that so much had not conspired to keep her caged and silent."

"Why aren't you in a rage?" I grab her arms in my hands. "Why are you weeping? Why do you go about your life mourning? Remembering, March is the month she began to die, April is the month she went to bed. June was the month of her journal. August...September was the month we said, 'not now, there is too much death in this month, too many black birds, too many crows, wait...October.' She waited. October was the month she died...why don't you rage?"

"You do it for me," Arda says, "it's your job."

"Why mine?"

"Because you claim it. You rage!"

"But what if Aurora hadn't torn her body open, maybe if she had been content to live quietly, without speaking, maybe if she had not torn herself apart, she would still be..."

"She would be dead. Earlier. Suffocated. The entire body turned to stone...or erupted in a thousand wounds and pustules. She would have died in a plague...you rage!"

"And don't you think less of me that I fight this for you. I barely knew Aurora. I take her on as if she were my dead. Don't you think less of me that I don't have my own dead?"

"Everyone has dead...too many. No one has her own dead. They belong to all of us. And you're absurd wanting more, yours, when you hate death so..."

The book writes itself. It dictates what must be said. I am the medium. The words pass through me, water going from one river to another. The fish follow the river. The fish spawn. The riverbed does not pride itself on facilitating this activity.

This is a journal which belongs to several women. Nothing is secret here. Everything written down has been agreed to. The journal is authentic nevertheless. Life holds us with a thousand mundane calls. Dinners to cook. Letters to write. Talk. Yet there is something else. I have no grandiose plans except survival.

Arda sits in the chair. I sit across from her. "Dare I say all this about us?"

"Call it anthropology, if you must," she says sternly. "Call it field work, Journalism. Oral history."

"I imagine my mother reading this, feeling the pain erode the pleasure. 'Why do you have to say all this,' she asks."

Arda nods. "There is no way she'll understand. I do the work I do because my mother's dead. My work is orphan's work."

"Write that down," I tell her, "it'll make a wonderful title for a book."

"No! You write it down. Remember, I'm the archive; you're the scribe."

"So there Arda. I've stolen it. It's on the page. It's yours though. Take it back if you want it."

"And why do you persist in thinking only one of us can use it. Shall we footnote every thought and breath so as to know who thought of it first. The first man up to Everest. The first man on the moon...That isn't our game, is it? That only the first counts. Each idea they devise gets used up so quickly, one shot and it's done. No wonder the thought is so thin, it doesn't have flesh on it. The witch was right. Hansel was thin as a bone. He did need fattening. He only chewed something once. But the hags chew the bones and marrow like a cud."

"Once, Arda, I wrote a story about a woman and read it and she said, so sadly, 'Oh I wanted to write it...'"

"Of course. Did you encourage her?"

"Yes, but she felt it was too late. I had told it, and now it wasn't hers anymore."

"She was wrong, wasn't she?"

"Yes. That was her disease. Another form of silence.

"We tell these stories again and again. It is never enough. They do not empty. Yet sometimes it is like talking to a mirror. You open your mouth and my words emerge. I can't tell us apart."

"You never learn, do you."

"Well, look at me. I grow fat. I feed on you. I take you in. I plunder you. Everything I see is mine. Everything I hear is mine..."

"Ours! Don't fixate on the notion of property again!"

In the morning I write in my journal. Like Ana. Then I write the book. I put you in this book, you Alicia, Aurora, Tamara, Arda, Elizabeth, Leyva. And you also, Ana and Alma, though I do not ask your permission. In the end I will send out a little piece of paper asking you to allow me to commit this outrageous act. This is your journal, but I do not know another way. How can I write about my life as if you had not stepped into it. I have no life separate from yours.

I expose us nakedly. I want to look at the snake women in yourselves, at the raw flesh beyond the skin, at the bone, the place where life and death meet in us and dance together. You live in me, hot creatures, whose mouths suck and chew my bones. Your feet in my breast, on my breast bone, are the only remedies I know against the boots which would tread my spine.

I send out letters to everyone: Arda, Elizabeth, Leyva, Tamara. "Be warned. Prepare for an invasion. This is the book of our lives." A book of healing. While we write it, while we peel the skin from each other, we make a graft. Here where I am naked, where I have been burned by fire, I take some skin from the inside of your thigh, and there where you are stripped and the flesh is vulnerable, I give you something to cover yourself with from the softest part of myself, from under the arm, the breast. There will be no scars, I promise you. This is a book of healing. This is a book of healing, of grafting each other's skin over our wounds while we lie still, thigh to thigh until it takes.

The women gather their old flesh into sacks and carry it along the road. Under bridges in the middle of the night, they tell stories to one another. Each secret told gains a year.

"Why are you telling me this?" one asks.

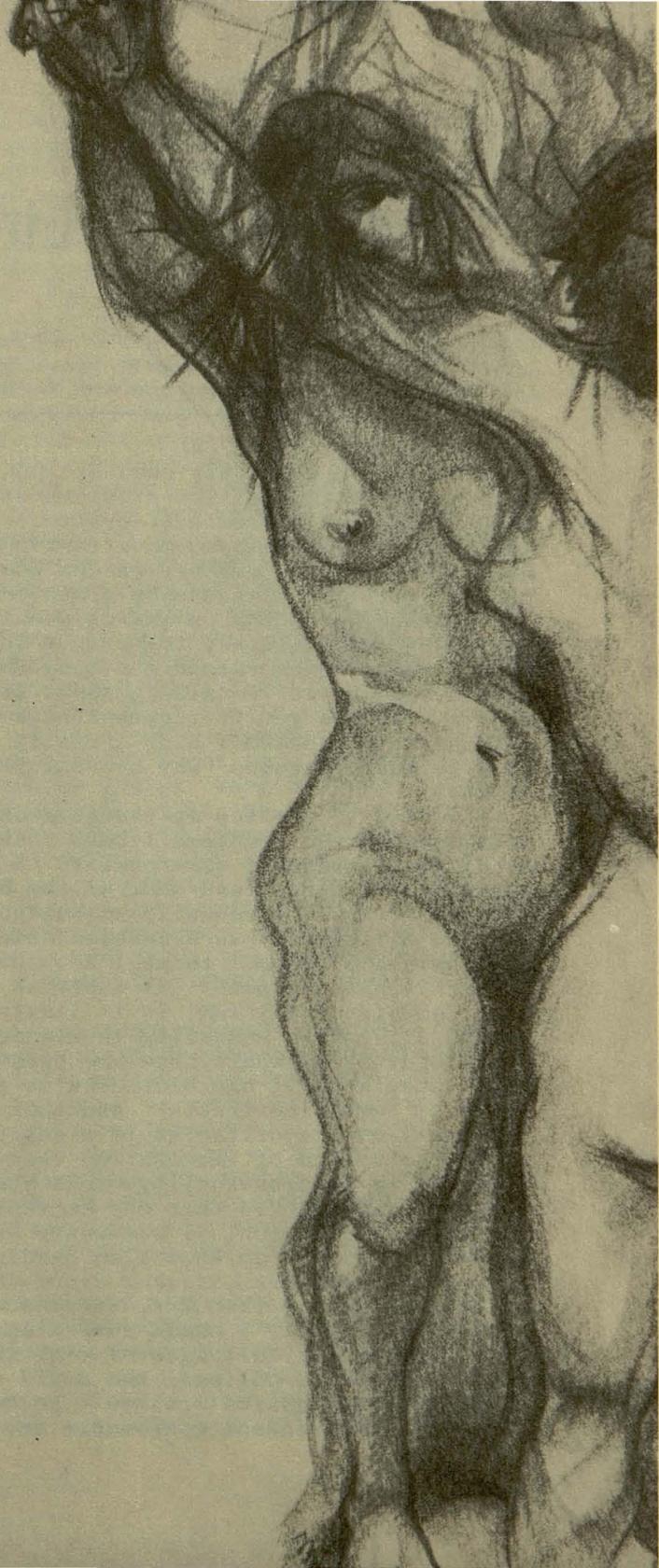
"So I won't die."

They gather the secrets up like stones and put them in a rag bag, in a soup, under the house. The sack is as heavy as that which drowned the witch. It is with these very rocks that they were stoned once upon a time.

Once upon a time...

And no more.

# AESTHETICS



# Lesbians & Literature

a seminar at the Modern Language Association, San Francisco, December, 1975, with June Arnold, Sandy Boucher, Susan Griffin, Melanie Kaye and Judith McDaniel

---

Judith McDaniel:

I wanted to open this seminar today. I'm going to be talking about some of the problems of teaching traditional texts as a lesbian feminist critic. I do have a problem and this problem came to my attention about two years ago when I was doing a seminar on *The Woman's Voice in Modern Literature*. In a discussion group on *Mrs. Dalloway* one of my students was going on and on about why Clarissa preferred Richard Dalloway to Peter. This conversation ended when a young woman raised her hand and said, "I don't understand why we're talking about Richard and Peter. Why didn't Clarissa get it together with Sally?" And I thought, now that's a problem I hadn't really considered. I'll come back to that, because "Why not Sally?" is the title of this talk.

I wanted to preface my thoughts on Clarissa Dalloway with some of the problems I have found teaching in this traditional academic environment. I think that we're just beginning to understand some of the dimensions of feminist criticism, and I personally am beginning to ask if I am reading differently as a lesbian feminist than friends who are feminists. And I think I am. But if I am, how does it work? What happens? If there is such a thing as a lesbian feminist criticism, is it limited to explicating images of lesbian sexuality in standard works? Or to finding closet dykes where none had been suspected? Or denying that label when it has been used as perjorative for certain types of female portraits? And then I wondered, perhaps lesbian feminist criticism is a political or thematic perspective, a kind of imagination that can see beyond the barriers of heterosexuality, role stereotypes, patterns of language and culture that may be repressive to female sexuality and expression. I obviously have an opinion, but no answers. Still I do know I am reading differently from a friend who read *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* without realizing that Mrs. Stevens was a lesbian.

This past fall, I began reviewing *Mrs. Dalloway* with Dora Odarenko, a colleague of mine in the English Department of Skidmore College, who could not be here today to present these remarks with me. We began to recount the familiar and frequent statements about relationships in

this novel; for example, Woolf says of Clarissa and Sally, "They spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe." Mrs. Dempster is thinking about pretty young Maisie Johnson and she says to herself: "Get married...and then you'll know... But whether I'd have chosen quite like that if I could have known...Pity she asked of Maisie Johnson, standing by the hyacinth beds." Peter observes about Clarissa and Richard: "With twice his wits, she had to see things through his eyes--one of the tragedies of married life." Clarissa thinks of Sally's uniqueness: "it was bound, Clarissa used to think, to end in some awful tragedy; her death; her martyrdom; instead of which she had married, quite unexpectedly..." When Clarissa and Peter face each other at their reunion, she sits with her scissors and he fiddles with his pocket knife. When Richard buys his wife flowers, he goes to her "bearing his flowers like a weapon."

Why is this kind of selection not trivial, obvious? Dora and I had the impression it was not and we confirmed this by looking at the function of certain major images in the novel itself which sustain that impression. There are two passages of vivid and sensual description of female sexuality that simply can't be ignored. One occurs as Clarissa realizes that in "something yielding to the charm of a woman...she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt," and then goes into a description of female sexuality as a curative. The second, and much more extensive, is given to Peter's consciousness as he listens to a battered old woman sing of Love. "As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube station still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain."

There is power here, transforming power, in this description, and in contrast, the most obvious male images one remembers in the novel are not transformative; if they illuminate, it is only briefly: "a match burning in a crocus; like an inner meaning almost expressed." Or the male images become ludicrous in context, as in the scene when Miss Kilman, "fingering the last two inches of a chocolate eclair...opened her mouth, slightly projected her chin, and swallowed down the last inches of the chocolate eclair, then wiped her fingers, and washed the tea round in her cup."

This sense of deliberate and provocative emphasis is heightened when we look at the mythic women who appear in the novel...there are no male counterparts for the terms in which these goddess women are presented. The old woman singing becomes "the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth." She has sung "through all ages--when the

pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman...stood singing of love, love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails"... and when she ever dies, "laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice...then the pageant of the universe would be over." No parallel male image appears in the novel.

In other sequences Peter imagines a solitary traveller meeting an elderly woman "who seems...to seek, over a desert, a lost son; to search for a rider destroyed; to be the figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world." Sir William Bradshaw's goddess Proportion "has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance. Conversion is her name" in this scene, but in India she is Kali, in Africa yet another. Ineffectual, but dominating Lady Millicent Bruton was a woman who "could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes and lain under a shield noiseless in a church or made a green grass mound on some primeval hillside..."

The tension created by these images and their expectations, or rather the expectations of the reader, is never resolved. The one moment of insight, the epiphanic encounter between Clarissa and Sally in the garden, is severely limited. It occurs too early in the novel for its felt influence to carry through to Sally's arrival at Clarissa's party. And it is solitary. There is only void after, nothing replaces that moment in either woman's life. Clarissa gives parties. Sally gardens because plants are so superior to human relationships.

So when I began talking about Virginia Woolf this fall a student came up to me and said, "Ms. Odarenko says that Clarissa is *not* a lesbian." I too have come to agree that such a label is unnecessarily reductive. She is not a lesbian. Clarissa is a woman trying unsuccessfully to reconcile herself to her marriage. The perils of heterosexuality as a rigid social and personal vision are clearly shown. But there is no woman in this novel who understands the implications of her own insight about these perils. We have a sense that they bear the consequences of their choices without fully knowing or identifying the sources of these pressures. Clarissa goes upstairs to her ever narrowing bed "like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower." Clarissa is not a lesbian, but she does not know why. She has failed those impulses, those desires, those talents of energy and imagination which might have led her to amazon achievement, the writing of great poetry, the ability to feel and create transforming love.

To return once more to my beginning question, why doesn't Clarissa get it together with Sally? Indeed, why not? It seems quite clear that there is some level on which this

expectation is raised and it is not, obviously, fulfilled in the novel. It would be gratuitous to criticize Virginia Woolf for raising an issue that she did not resolve. It is fine that she raised it at all. I don't feel we can descend toward Woolf for raising the important question of what it is possible in any society for women to achieve. The problem is that the question she raised has not been clearly understood or explicated by conventional criticism and it is only when we can ask, "Why not Sally?" that Woolf's text begins to assume its full social, political and literary dimensions.

*Sandra Boucher:*

I assume I am speaking to a roomful of writers--whether we're writing poems or stories or scholarly papers or dissertations or letters or diaries--some of us are participating in the creation of lesbian images in literature that will be quite different from those given us by a previous generation of writers.

I'm going to talk about my own experience in writing stories--three stories in particular. My first story about lesbians was written when I was 24 years old and just married. The year before I had been involved in a relationship with a woman and I wrote this story to terrify myself, to keep me firmly within a heterosexual lifestyle, to lock the door on my closet, you might say. In order to do this, in the story I had to create a liaison between two women that was so dangerous and so doomed that I would never be tempted to try it again myself. The two women in the story were abstractions taken from what I knew generally about lesbians, plus a little bit of erotic detail which I had picked up firsthand. The story progressed from falling in love, to fear, inner torment, and intimations of disaster--the romantic, tragic (very usual) way of looking at lesbian relationships, at least in stories. And it ended with the suggestion of suicide.

This story was very successful. It really did frighten me a lot. It had served its purpose, and so I put it away. Even though I was writing and publishing stories at that time, this story was meant for my eyes alone. I showed it to no one. The year was 1961. So really I was doing what was possible for me within that historical context--of the late fifties, early sixties.

I had a B.A. in English Literature, but it is a notable point that I could do all the reading necessary for that degree, and I had never come across an overtly lesbian character. In Gertrude Stein, in Carson McCullers and Virginia Woolf, there were women who acted rather strangely sometimes, but you would never have been able to say definitely that they were lesbians. I had not read Colette yet, or Proust or Djuna Barnes, or the rest of Virginia Woolf, or Margaret Anderson, or *Psychopathia Sexualis*, or many other writers and books I later came upon.

The gentlest male treatment I can remember was a novel by Robert Kirsch, who was the Book Review Editor of the *L.A. Times*. The central character was an uppermiddleclass housewife who was going through some sort of crisis and was having a series of brutal and thoroughly disgusting and humiliating affairs with men. At one point she meets another housewife in her neighborhood who seems to be a decent human being, and happens to be a lesbian, and who invites the central character to be her lover. At which the male author speaks with horror through his character's mind, "Oh no, *not that!*" and he sends her out into the world for another encounter with a man even worse than the preceding ones.

So this was the context in which that first story was written. You might say it was the "Oh no, *not that!*" approach to lesbianism.

Ten years later in the early 70's it was a different world. And I was a different person. I was no longer married. I had become a feminist and then a lesbian. I had been living for three years in a collective of women and children from which we put out a feminist newspaper and did other political work. I felt connected to and supported by the community of women and the feminist and lesbian writers I knew here in San Francisco.

On a backpacking trip in the Sierras, I began thinking about my first woman lover, the woman I had known before I got married. Hiking along, I began to tell myself the story of who that woman was, how we met, and what we did together and I was trying to bring her back, trying to evoke the real woman just as she had been, and the intensity of that experience for me. The activity of hiking in the mountains was woven in and became the frame for the story. And as I told it to myself over and over, I became aware that the theme of climbing the mountain was a metaphor for the long and difficult journey I had traveled since I knew that woman. In writing this story--which is called "Mountain Radio"--I was accepting her back into my life. Here's a quote from the story to give you an idea of who she was:

"Lenora is a woman of sorrows. We sit in the back of the shop, and we drink tea and she tells me about her life. A long road dotted with stopping places full of anguish, the rest rough and lonely. She is a jewish/catholic 38-year-old reformed-alcoholic dyke who thinks that being a lesbian is the worst misfortune in the world. She is a small sad cocky individual permanently barred from the respect of her fellow citizens, whose only satisfying relationship is with her poodle, Anna Pavlova. We sit over our tea and for hours she indulges in her melancholy, talking in a deep caramel voice about lost lovers."

The story was an acceptance of Lenora, and it accorded her the considerable importance she had had in my life. It expressed the joy of our brief knowing of each other and *finally* acknowledged my identification with her.

So, besides being an account of certain characters and events, and a pondering on various ideas, the story was a political statement, a declaration of loyalties, and a definition of myself as "a woman responsible to myself, having chosen to love women and having opted out of allegiance to and support of, the Man." (It's interesting that when "Mountain Radio" was accepted for publication in *Ms.* magazine, the line I just read you was the one line they wanted to cut.)

The third story I want to mention, which is called "Retaining Walls," is a sequel to "Mountain Radio." It is about my going back to visit Lenora as she is today. I soon discover that she is no longer the gaunt tragic person she had been (or I had thought she was). She and her lover are two aging dykes, comfortably settled in the suburbs of a Midwestern city. Superficially, it would seem they live much like their straight neighbors, yet there are crucial differences arising from their being two women who love each other. It was the tensions within their outwardly secure and comfortable lifestyle that struck me and that I wanted to investigate in the story, besides my own reaction to the changes in Lenora and the impossibility of finding again what we had had together.

The first two stories I've talked about were self-serving--a working out of urgencies in my own life. In "Retaining Walls," I was more free to serve the story. I cared a lot about Lenora and her lover, and I felt, especially when I began to read the story aloud to groups of women, that in writing as honestly as I could about these women, I had been writing about myself and many of us.

So there has been a progression. The first story was a cautionary tale, the second one, a confrontation with the past and a political statement. Now, with "Retaining Walls," I am committed to an examination of *what is* in our lives.

*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 a 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 a lesbian and I thought I was doing that because of the issue of child custody. That was and 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. And so therefore I couldn't really call myself a lesbian. I couldn't use that word to myself and words are magic. Shakespeare understood word 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 this 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.*

---

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 development 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 woman 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 experimentated 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 we are all in the process of writing together. I feel 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 teapippers 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.)

Melanie Kaye:

Judith talked about teaching as a lesbian, and the other three panelists talked eloquently and beautifully about writing as lesbians. I'm going to talk about reading as a lesbian, about what I look for in lesbian literature, what does and doesn't nourish me.

I want to talk about six books; first, two which make me angry: Kate Millett's *Flying* and Marge Piercy's *Small Changes*. I mention them not because I'm peevish but because they're best sellers and they don't give me what I need. Marge Piercy depicts women's relationships, sexual or not, which seem lacking any inner dynamism; frankly, I don't understand what goes on between those women. The novel seems written from the outside, to explain feminism in general and lesbianism in particular to people who find these phenomena alien; a worthy goal but one Piercy fails to achieve, since I (from the inside) do not experience her women as full, credible people. The novel's single lesbian relationship is so *correct*. I no longer go to literature for positive images of gay women: I see these all around me in my own life and the lives of my friends. The right-on relationship between Beth and Wanda teaches me nothing; it bores me. What I want is a thoughtful sifting of experience that helps me to understand the present or envision the future.

*Flying* is, I think, a much more honest book, written perhaps too much from the inside; I never stopped feeling like a voyeur. Kate Millett presents herself as overwhelmed by and incapable of learning from her experience, as wallowing in her pain. And I have enough trouble making sense of my own experience without reading a book by someone who doesn't understand hers.

So let me move on to four books which do give me what I want. Sandy Boucher's *Assaults and Rituals* offers exactly this thoughtful sifting of experience from a perspective I recognize as woman-identified, written from the inside. And not just her inside. She enters into other subjectivities: an old Mallorcan woman who, grief-dulled, refuses to be dragged back into the business of human relationships; her ten-year-old self's account of a father destroying his son, her brother; and especially, in the open-ended stories in which she appears, unashamedly "I," "Mountain Radio" and "Retaining Walls," where she pays such careful, loving attention to the actual being of the woman who was her first female lover, and (in "Retaining Walls") to her former lover's lover. The relationship between June and Lenora is *not* correct; it seems, even from a sympathetic point of view, somewhat stifling. I share Sandy's frustration trying to explain the women's movement, the gay movement to these isolated middle-aged sisters, share her irritation at June's perpetual chatter. But the right of June and Lenora to their own perceptions is assumed. They are presented with respect. These stories weave the texture of life lived by someone who understands where her life is going, even if she doesn't know the exact form it will take. Nothing gets

solved but experience is integrated, learned from, and one continues to be--as Adrienne Rich has said--rash enough to go on changing her life.

The next book I want to mention is June Arnold's *The Cook and the Carpenter*. The non-gendered pronoun, *na*, is what you first notice; but if that were all the book offered, it would be an overweight gimmick. I made my decisions early and easily about who was what sex, and stuck to them; but I'm used to women building things, living together, making love. Perhaps *na* performs more startling revelations for heterosexuals. What was important to me about the book is that it's one of the few to come out of the movement which deals lyrically and non-pedagogically with the joy of making our new lives, free-form, of creating our own moments of order, of loving without role-constrictions or directions, of trying to build a political movement which is at once effective and generous--and with the difficulty of doing so. I appreciate June's treating political reality, not in a pedantic fashion, like Piercy, for those dummies who don't have their act together on race, class, sex and sexuality, but with some trust in people's ability to understand these political facts. I also appreciate the book's taking seriously the lives of both middle-aged and adolescent women without confusing them. For me, at age 30, it suggests possibilities of growing older as a full human presence.

Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* is a book of vision and change, in which four female experiences face each other, as in distorting mirrors. The woman of the 30's is who we escaped being (though she reminds me of my adolescence in the 50's); the contemporary woman, like ourselves, confronts daily an old world with her raised consciousness and all that rage, too familiar; Jael, the terrifying harpy of an inverted patriarchal world where women rule and men are slaves, objects; and Janet, from an all-women world, embodies an unsentimental and thoroughly interesting vision of a possible future. Janet's existence suggests that there are a million ways we might go, and that we get to choose. I am getting now into something else I want from lesbian literature: new ways of imagining the future, both abstract and intimate. I have so many old ways of being, I need from literature a sense of awakenings, directions, possibilities. One of the book's most powerful sections is the visit to Jael's world. It reminds me of what I don't want, of the dangers of assuming that we are inherently better--more generous, kinder, more sensitive--than men, that the NICE gene sits securely on our X chromosomes, and that if we had power over them, all would be well. An added bonus from this section is the scene in which Jael fucks her houseboy Davy: she takes him into her, she rides him; his penis is not a "rod," does not become erect: it is "little davy" and it fills up; the inversion of traditional images of heterosexual sex made me recognize again and deeply just how arbitrary, how serviceable to the patriarchy, these traditional

images are, for this inversion seemed at least equally accurate. This is something else I want from lesbian literature: weapons with which I can fight back against my own socialization.

Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres* gives me both weapons and vision. Everything in the book--images of a female collectivity, non-linear narrative, inventive language, revised mythologies, the insistently present tense of the sentences dissolving time so that our cause-and-effect mentality staggers, bewildered--the very process of reading the book forces us into battle against the patriarchal modes of thinking in our own heads. It inundates me with a huge range of options, ways our liberation will happen, is happening, the many people I could be. It helps me work through my anger, gives me permission to hate, kill, dismember and devour men; and then heals me: "The women say, whether men live or die, they no longer have power." Perhaps most important and most intriguing, it lets me imagine living not as an individual, an isolated ego locked in my own skin, but as part of a tribe. It seems obvious that in order to make the future we want we're going to have to learn to perceive ourselves and each other in astonishing new ways. Wittig envisions us as one, illuminates the depth and complexity of individualism, the thousand tiny tightnesses and fears that pull us apart, make us afraid to join or create or believe in movements for social change. Finally, the book assures me that victory is not only possible but inevitable: "They say, does the weapon exist that can prevail against you?"

I'm not sure exactly what the focus of my remarks is. Maybe what I'm talking to is the writer in people, asking for what I want people to write. I don't want to read lesbian literature that recapitulates old patterns, or tells easy, pleasant lies, or creates a world of women-loving-women divorced from the political facts of life. I want books that help me realize just how deep the revolution I need and need to make is, that it is fundamentally not spiritual or escapist or rural or moon-worshipping or orgasmic, though all these may be included, but that it is a question of gaining power over our lives, that is to say, political. I need books which begin with this assumption, which deal with the many-layered changes through which we are passing, which help me to imagine changes to come. I need inspiration. And I look to lesbian literature for this inspiration because it seems that mostly women who dare to imagine such deep changes are lesbians.

# The New Tradition

—bonnie zimmerman

Next to ants, human beings must comprise the species most compelled to order, organize and categorize. It is not enough that we insist on writing books; once they are written, we are obsessed with ordering these books into traditions. And the traditions thus created--like the seductive, mind-numbing chant of "And Seth begat Enos begat Cainan"--have been used very purposely to establish the literary Gospel that keeps us all in line. We have the Gospel according to the Norton Anthology and the Gospel according to the Oxford Anthology and the Gospel according to F.R. Leavis, and if there are minor divergences between the main traditions, as in Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, the basic outline doesn't change. We still learn in our English classes that Wordsworth/Coleridge begat Byron/Shelley/Keats begat Tennyson/Browning; that George Eliot begat Henry James begat Conrad and on to more recent times.

Not only are these the writers who are read, these are the writers who define what "art" is. And, to judge from the Gospels, one would think that all great art had been written with a pen in one hand and a penis in the other. (Had Mary Ann Evans not fortuitously adopted a male pseudonym whatever would the Great Tradition have done?) Virginia Woolf observed the situation and turned away shuddering to investigate the ramifications of the female sentence. Several twentieth century critics have noted that the hands are all smooth and manicured and have uncovered an alternate tradition of working class and radical writers. In the wake of the radicalism of the late sixties, many have abandoned entirely the idea of traditions at all: all standards of "good" and "bad" are meaningless at best, elitist and reactionary at worst. And the feminist movement has begun to uncover the tradition of women's literature and to continue it with a conscious commitment to feminist writing. Two recent books, *Literary Women* by Ellen Moers and *Lesbian Images* by Jane Rule, make this attempt to trace the traditions actually existant in literature written by women and by lesbians, respectively. In both cases, the results are informative and provocative but of mixed success.

Ellen Moers' purpose is to make sense out of the tradition of women writers. She reminds us that someone else was involved in all those begats, and what is more important, these others created their own tradition or, more cor-

rectly, community of art and expression. For *Literary Women* does not create a "great tradition" but instead explores a democratic female commonality. It shows us that the women writers of the past have not been austere matriarchs, but transmitters of an acknowledgeably female experience. The path from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Emily Dickinson, from George Eliot to Gertrude Stein, from Ann Radcliffe to Sylvia Plath, from George Sand and Mme. de Staël to virtually everyone else reminds us that *communicate* and *community* have the same root. I do not know if the responsibility lies with male writers or male critics, but the great tradition concept creates a literary Olympic in which each writer vies for the most points. The myth of Chronos and Zeus-- that a poet can only be born by killing his predecessors-- is a male myth. *Literary Women* illustrates a different myth, that of growth and fruition through cooperation: the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Moers began her book with what she calls an open question: "What did it matter that so many of the great writers of modern times have been women? what did it matter to literature? For this is something new, something distinctive of modernity itself, that the written word in its most memorable form, starting in the eighteenth century, became increasingly and steadily the work of women." (xi). The focus of her study is primarily the English, American and French writers of the nineteenth century, what she calls the "epic age" (a term used by both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Virginia Woolf). Her values are not primarily those of style but of content and vision: her dominant figures include Browning and George Sand, whom standard critics (wrongly) dismiss with a shudder, and Mme. de Staël, who I suspect is probably unreadable today. Moers wants to discover the way women writers have perceived their world, themselves and each other and the way in which they have turned their perceptions into fictional and poetic form. The range of subjects she comes up with includes "Romanticism, opera, pronouns, landscape, work, childhood, mysticism, the Gothic, courtship, metaphor, travel, literacy, revolution, monsters, education" (xii-xiii). As this list suggests, the book is also fun to read.

Moers' ultimate success is, however, mixed. She succeeds quite brilliantly with much of her literary history. The direct connections she uncovers between various women writers is the strongest point of the book. Emily Dickinson, for example, wrote lyric poems, arias as it were, on the recitative of Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. . . .

*Literary Women* is, as a whole, a rather amorphous but strikingly brilliant mass with admirable breadth but somewhat unexplored depth. I am not sure we can always trust her general conclusions or her individual interpretations: for example, I can claim some expertise about George Eliot and I don't agree with most of her literary interpretations. If I am being fair, then I wonder how valid are her readings

of other authors. And in one respect, of most relevance to this issue, Moers is irritatingly near-sighted. The index lists only two references to lesbianism. One reference classifies it among the "monsters" women writers have created in the twentieth century Gothic; the other identifies it as an epithet, along with harpy and neurotic, viciously attached to the lives of women artists. Now, that single women are called lesbians as an insult is obvious to us all and it is good that Moers is sensitive to the nastiness women writers have had to endure. But many great writers *were* lesbians and surely that has influenced their consciousness as women. . . .

The association of lesbians with contempt and disgust is more blatantly homophobic when we consider how much is left out or distorted in Moers' interpretations. The most obvious example to me was her analysis of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." The poem may indeed be a fantasy of childhood sexuality, but in a more complex way than Moers dares to make explicit. The "rough-and-tumble sexuality of the nursery" (105) in the poem is not the memory of rolls in the hay with brothers as she suggests, for those goblin men are too horrifying, repellent and threatening. They represent, rather, a childhood (and adult) fear and disgust of sexual contact with men. The unconscious sexuality that fuels the poem, which even Moers recognizes as its erotic core, is between the two sisters. The fundamental attraction is more than sexual, it is an emotional bond creating a protective community sheltered from the hostile male world. As such, I believe "Goblin Market" is a fantasy symbol of the female culture and emotional inter-dependence that Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (*Signs*, I, No. 1) has called the foundation of nineteenth century domestic life. That Moers could misinterpret this poem, when its implications are so in line with her delineation of female literary commonality, suggests a deep fear of any implication, however subconscious, of lesbian sexuality. It is hardly surprising, then, to read that Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein never married without a mention that they did, in fact, share their lives--with women. Nor is it unexpected that the discussion of women's love poetry as "verse letters directed by a woman to the specific man she loves" (167) refers to Sappho, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louise Bogan--all of whom definitely or at least arguably wrote love poetry to women.

For Ellen Moers, lesbianism is a very small part of literary tradition--the smaller the better. For Jane Rule, in *Lesbian Images*, it is a literary tradition in itself. In her preface, Rule says:

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive literary or cultural history of lesbians. It is, rather, a common reader--or not so common reader--a statement of my own attitudes toward lesbian experience as

measured against the images made by other women writers in their work and/or their lives.

But this statement is too ingenuous. Rule does not primarily give us a statement of her own attitudes, but a personal definition of a tradition of lesbian art. When she says, "my concern is to discover what images of lesbians women writers have projected in fiction, biography, and autobiography" (3) she is in effect saying that it is justifiable to read women writers specifically for the sexual content of their life, to interpret specific literary creations as "lesbian" and, in some way, to link that together in what can only be called a tradition. Now all this may be possible and enlightening. One would only ask that the category "lesbian writer" be argued and developed--as Moers does with the category "woman writer"--and not assumed.

*Lesbian Images* is a valuable book in several respects. For the casual reader who wants an intelligently annotated reading list, it is invaluable. It is much more useful than "The Lesbian in Literature" bibliography, and, as a friend of mine said, it is the only book of its kind around. Although I am surprised at some of her omissions (what about Virginia Woolf, Sybille Bedford, Mary Renault, Kay Boyle, Jane Bowles, Monique Wittig or innumerable poets?) she covers the territory with adequate breadth and depth. For the curious, whether lesbian or not, *Lesbian Images* provides fascinating tidbits of information and perceptive discussions of many excellent books. But for any purpose deeper than enjoyment or bibliography, some warnings need to be made.

Rule has a very definite political, or perhaps I should say sociological, orientation, summed up nicely in her introduction: "I am concerned with the interaction of these writers with their culture, that is, how they are influenced by religious and psychological concepts and by their own personal experience in presenting lesbian characters." Now those of us who feel that culture concerns something more than religion and psychology may find ourselves put off by Rule's rather simplistic history of homosexuality. It is unfortunate that she chose to begin her book in this way, for actually religion and psychology only intrude on her literary analysis in the discussion of Radclyffe Hall, where it seems quite justified. I suspect that many of Rule's readers, like myself, will cursorily jump over the early chapters the first time. We are not confronted with her politics again until her final chapter on recent non-fiction which extols *Lesbian Woman* as the best book of its kind (which it admittedly may be as yet) and very uncomfortably and defensively attempts to come to terms with Jill Johnston and radical lesbian/feminism. But between Freud and Johnston, we are gratefully spared much in the way of political analysis.

I also found myself confused and somewhat annoyed throughout by the rather hazy sense of purpose behind the

book. Rule seems to be uneasy in her relation both to other lesbians and to the straight world. She finds it necessary to justify herself to "militant lesbians who find me a political sell-out of the worst sort," (10) which is merely symptomatic of the book's real problem. Rule also feels it necessary to justify lesbians as a group to the straight world: "For anyone who wants to know what it is to be lesbian, this book offers as many answers as there are voices to speak" (heaven help us if we are judged by the lives of Colette and Violette Leduc!) Thus, she extols Maureen Duffy for having "contributed nearly as many portraits of lesbians as Colette did in the whole of her writing life" (175). She looks too myopically at the surface of literature, what appears to people, rather than at its depth, the transformation of reality through the medium of an author's mind. It is difficult not to conclude that Rule stays on the surface because she does not want to see beneath, that a part of her is still insecure about being a lesbian and needs to defend the category with glitter and pomp: "If this book astonishes simply by the number of women, and very gifted women, who have been concerned about love between women, it will have fulfilled its purpose, *for no one can comfortably dismiss all those who find a place in these pages*" (italics mine). Such is also the message of her self-justification about including Dorothy Baker: "If Dorothy Baker were alive today, I hope she would be pleased to find herself in such good company as this book has gathered together" (157). This suggests a rather awful vision of a Society to Improve the Image of Lesbians tea party.

Another warning I will make is that approximately sixty percent of the literary section of *Lesbian Images* consists of plot summary and another thirty biography, leaving only ten percent for literary and social analysis. Within this, Rule raises many important points although she can do no more than suggest further lines of inquiry. She briefly introduces the ideas of Richard Bridgman that Gertrude Stein's notorious obscurity veils many references to Alice Toklas and their sexual love. It is good to see that she does not limit the discussion to *Q.E.D.*, which, after all, is hardly major Stein. She does a fine hatchet job on the straight male bias of Willa Cather critics, insisting that her sexual tastes "extended rather than limited her sensibility," particularly in her ability to project herself through both male and female consciousness. I especially liked her handling of Colette, always a curiously alienating writer to me: "The only bed really big enough for Colette was her own, the raft of her old age, on which she went on denying the value of her own great gift in favor of being a woman" (138). And I am grateful to anyone who can help bring Maureen Duffy out of her undeserved obscurity. Against these I would balance derivative and workmanlike discussions of Vita Sackville-West, Elizabeth Bowen, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Dorothy Baker and distortingly brief references to important modern writers like Djuna Barnes, Anais Nin and

Bertha Harris lost amidst many commonplace and minor "popular" novelists.

Many of Rule's points are only the seeds of further exploration, such as in her discussion of May Sarton: "The Muse [for Sarton] is irrevocably female; therefore a poet really has no choice but to seek inspiration in women. If that poet happens to be a woman, lesbian attachments are essential to her art" (165). Pursuing this beyond Sarton's "protective" use of the Muse, what is the source of artistic inspiration and the actual process of art? Do women (or lesbians) create differently than do men? What, if any, unique symbols are used by women? These questions have been asked by artists like Judy Chicago (*Through the Flower*) and writers like Marguerite Duras (*Signs*, I, No. 2) but so far I have not found their answers satisfactory as either a feminist or a lesbian.

One other problem with the approach of "lesbian images" (just as with "images of women") is that it blurs or totally ignores the distinctions of different cultures and historical periods. Lesbianism for Colette and Violette Leduc was not quite the same as it was for Anglo-American writers. To paraphrase the critic Rebecca West, Colette could say a lot of things for which British writers would have been thrown in the slammer. Nineteenth century domestic culture, the Suffrage movement and twentieth century Freudianism all left distinct marks on relationships between women--as the contemporary women's movement is doing. What we are so quick to label "lesbian" was a quite different, and important, phenomenon to Willa Cather, Ivy Compton-Burnett or Elizabeth Bowen (and even more unique as we move further back into the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries.) The deeper we look into historical distinctions, the more complex and fascinating they undoubtedly will prove to be.

I was also intrigued by the personal lives of these writers (like another friend of mine who was struck by how *unhappy* these women seemed), the question of whether lesbian literature falls into specific genres (such as the girls' school novel, the *ménage à trois*, the initiation into adulthood and so on), and the thorny issue of class and decadence. But I want to move on to what I found to be the most involved of these unexplored concerns: the issue of male or female identification. So many of Rule's portraits are of women who ran from their womanhood and adopted male identity with varying degrees of intensity. There was Radclyffe Hall of course, but also Stein and Cather and Violette Leduc; Duffy's most memorable character in *The Microcosm* is a heavy "butch" who cannot even identify with the female pronoun. Yet it is not quite right to say that Stein thought of herself as a man; clearly she identified strongly with the female sex in *Three Lives*, *Ida*, *Miss Furr and Miss Skene*, and *The Mother of Us All* (just to name pieces I am familiar with). What balance, what contradictions, what pains and joys divided these women against themselves? We know how to ask and answer this question now, because of feminism; we need no

longer be defensive about a woman's refusal to accept the limitations of femininity. Yet with the denial of femininity came, too often, the denial of womanhood, and surely this is a strong tension in the writing of lesbian women, probably stronger than in heterosexual women. How, then, does this affect their novels? I find the question extremely charged, for it seems to me that conscious lesbian literature, such as that by Hall, Leduc and even Rita Mae Brown, shows less love and respect for women than much "straight" literature. There is a strangely distorted love/hate relationship between lesbianism and feminism. And yet, this must be qualified, for so many of the most feminist (or proto-feminist) women writers, like Charlotte Bronte and Virginia Woolf, were motivated by an intense love for other women.

Thus, what I am led to through this rather convoluted reasoning is that the question before us does not concern the nature of *lesbian* writing, but the nature of *woman-identified* writing. Ellen Moers, through painstaking research and strong, if sometimes diffuse, argumentation, affirmed my belief in a female tradition in literature. I have never needed convincing that there is a female consciousness in literature. Jane Rule, however, failed me on both counts. I am not convinced that there is a *useful* category "lesbian writer." That many great (and not-so-great) writers had long and/or intense relationships, sexual or not, with other women; that they have at times made this explicit in their literature; that sometimes their sexual proclivities had a profound influence on their conception of themselves and their art: all this is clear from Rule's book. But that these women had any influence on each other; that they develop within similar cultural ambiances; that their relationships with women were the determining factor in their art; that, in fact, there really is a term "lesbian" that can meaningfully encompass Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Bowen, Margeret Anderson, Colette, Djuna Barnes, Jill Johnston, et al, is still an open question for me. Oddly enough, after the five years of my conscious identification with the lesbian movement, Rule's book leaves me questioning what, after all, is lesbianism.

For what common thread unites these women? They did not all have sexual relations with women, nor did they all describe explicitly lesbian women in their literature, nor, for that matter, are they all writers (unless one considers that Margaret Anderson's memoirs validate her place among writers rather than editors.) Ah, but did they not all love women and describe women loving women? Well, yes, but so does virtually every woman writer, and many men as well. Does Colette's sex make her voyeuristic portraits in *Ces Plaisirs* more a part of the "lesbian tradition" than D.H. Lawrence's in *The Fox*? Does the fact that Ivy Compton-Burnett lived with a woman (apparently without sex) make her one girls' school novel "lesbian" whereas *The Group* is dis-

qualified by Mary McCarthy's having a husband? Does it do justice to May Sarton to concentrate on the only two of her umpteen novels that suggest or admit to lesbianism? Why deal with *The Dark Island* and not *Orlando*?--because Virginia Woolf rejected Sackville-West sexually? My list of questions could go on for a considerable time.

I am quite surprised to find myself actually resenting the labelling of "lesbian" after reading *Lesbian Images*. I have been convinced my Jane Rule's own fear of ghettoization. *Lesbian Images* ghettoizes its subjects rather than considering the characteristics that open out of the ghetto into a community. And the community that I believe exists, that Rule does suggest behind the plot summaries, is created by woman-identification. Its opposition is not heterosexuality per se, but male-identification: the self-hatred that forces women, often lesbian, to reject their womanhood for approval or acceptance by the male world. I do not believe, and I write this guardedly, that there is a lesbian aesthetic, although lesbians today may deliberately create one out of pride, defiance, sexuality and revolution. But I firmly believe in a feminist aesthetic and a woman-identified consciousness. Lesbianism, in many different forms, is certainly vital to that consciousness but, at least historically, we cannot say that it has been essential in the creation of a literary tradition. I would hope our concepts will expand toward a greater understanding of the comprehensive women's culture that has always existed, though crushed for the most part beneath the iron foot of the great tradition. We need to define the many inspiring ways that women have provided love and support for each other: as mothers, sisters, friends, teachers, political comrades, lovers and literary mentors. I think we will find--we are finding--that the relationships women have had with each other throughout history have been deeper and more intense than we have ever imagined. Sexuality will then prove to be one way, given historical, cultural and personal conditions, in which women have solidified their bonds. Lesbianism will no longer be a ghetto, but one of the roads through which passes the encompassing world of women's culture.

Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Doubleday and Co., 1976)  
Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (Doubleday and Co., 1975)

This article has been slightly abridged. The entire text will appear in *Margins* #38.

# LESBIAN FICTION: a dialogue

JUNE ARNOLD and BERTHA HARRIS

J: You've given talks on lesbian fiction and so have I, so let's assume everybody is familiar with what has been said. I don't think we ought to begin at the beginning. Let's begin at the end. I was interested in your monster theory: what exactly is the monster? The girl falls in love with the monster and it's the male patriarchal power that tries to get her away from the monster?

B: And that leads to what I call phallic socialization.

J: Why does the girl fall in love with the monster? What does the monster represent to her?

B: The monster represents the merger of her maidenhood, in the literary sense of the word, with wildness. It's a rebellious act. The girl--the virgin--and the monster are a configuration of power. And it's the girl's last stand--both in literature and in life, too. For example, adolescent girls adore animals...there are a lot of psychological theories that explain this away but of course psychology is always wrong about that.

J: I think all our readers would agree that psychology is male bullshit. What I want to know now: there are certain girls who adore horses and there are other girls who are frightened of horses or who have an antipathy to animals. Would you say these girls are frightened of their own lesbianhood or bestiality?

- B: That's possible. The other possibility is that there's a different kind of girl and circumstances of her life don't get her in touch with animals, but she finds her particular image or configuration of wildness in other ways, for instance, locking herself in her room and doing nothing but reading novels and masturbating--which is what a lot of adolescent girls do--and knowing she's wrong. She has to figure out how she's going to join the world somehow. Joining the world means getting fucked, getting phallicly socialized.
- J: So the wildness is really the innate lesbianism in women--the desire for that freedom and that power?
- B: Lesbianism at that age means being a daughter all your life, being free all your life.
- J: I'd like to say something about power, because the daughter of mine who was most interested in horses identified with them partly because they were extremely powerful. They've always had that image, in mythology and in our dreams. Now she had what seemed to me a natural desire to express, to reinforce, her own sense of power. Would you say that lesbian fiction is conflicted right now because the women's movement (or certain parts of it) identifies power as male and refuses to have anything to do with power? Do lesbian writers feel--do you or I feel--that in our novels we have to tone down the urge to express that power which is possibly a root element in our lesbianism? Did you feel that when you were writing *Lover*, that you couldn't unleash the power altogether?
- B: No. *Lover* is the first thing in my life that I've ever written that I felt like I could go with a complete marriage with power. I think the most crucial political mistake women make is identifying power with the male. Men have no power. They've constructed institutions to give themselves power. Men recognize this too; in all their literature, women are identified with the physical, with the animal, with the earth, with sensations of violence. They always name hurricanes after women. It's in the popular, in the social, in the intellectual culture. When women deny that they have power and that they must take power, they're going with the male. Power isn't male; it's woman. But before I wrote *Lover*, the other two novels I wrote I was writing for the male establishment.
- J: For the male publishers and critics, and possibly teachers.
- B: Trying to get approval from them. I was disguising my power so they would like me. But with *Lover* I was able

to do it for a women's publishing company. I was able to do anything I wanted to, and the power happened. So you answer that question now.

- J: Well, I know when I wrote my first novel I held back from describing the actual physical brutality that existed in this marriage, and I often wondered why I did that. I agree that it was partly to please, but partly it was to deny that my life had really been that sort of gutter violent fighting thing because it certainly wasn't supposed to be, and I wanted to be universal. Had I been able to be really honest, that struggle within marriage would have been more visible, less literary. My character felt that her urge to win was "bad"--penis-envy, they called it. And I still feel the remnants of that--whether it's coming from the lesbian movement or just in me, I don't know. So I don't feel that *Sister Gin* is anywhere near the end; I think we're going to keep on being more and more honest, and the more lesbian readers we have and the more they respond, the more we're going to grow. I think our ultimate expression of lesbian power is yet to come. We're still crippled...
- B: We're peeling off layers--of inhibition and of what we've learned--and trying to recapture that which is the source of literature, which is intuition totally engaged with intellectuality, with a sense of arrogance about it.
- J: Yeah, arrogance is another word that's misunderstood. There's also an overwhelming humility in writing a book, because you know that you can only speak from your own limited sphere, your own consciousness, your own limited mind--which without gin sure seems limited. The gin helps a lot. But at some level you wait until the book is finished and women read it, because you're not sure that it *is* all women--it may be just your own crazy individual perversions.
- B: And that's where the fear comes in, along with the humility, because at the same time you're writing this book, you're terribly afraid that in expressing what you've experienced as a particular individualized thing, you're not going to be understood, that women at large won't see it. But they do, they always do.
- J: I want to say something about the fact that in the beginning of the women's movement, certain things were being codified. There was a particular style that you had to accept to join the women's movement: CR, not interrupting your sister, collectivity, exchanging jobs...
- B: Downward mobility, to use that sterile jargon.

J: Well, it did me a lot of good so I can't put it down. But I wonder if there's another kind of censorship going on among lesbians now which hasn't been stated: that we're supposed to write about women being tender, sensitive, understanding, etc., about women working in groups. But when you're in the middle of a novel and your character is doing something that's against that...

B: And you know it's true, what the character is doing.

J: You've got to stay with the character. Even if the character is a drunk and the critics say, Don't you know a lot of sisters are having trouble in the bars and they're becoming alcoholics and aren't you romanticizing alcohol? Do you think we have some responsibility to that, or do we only have responsibility to the character?

B: No. We have only responsibility to the character. If you're writing from the absolutely raw place. Because responsibility to the character and what you're doing is ultimately responsibility to the women's movement and to all lesbians.

J: Even though it's not clear right now.

B: Even though it's not popular or clear, because, along with us writing fiction, we assume that women who read are also peeling off layers of consciousness. I think a big misunderstanding of what sex is, has been put about through the lesbian-feminist movement in particular. Sex among women sounds like early childcare sometimes.

J: Babies playing in the rain and all love and sweetness.

B: We all know that's not true. Sex can be violent, and devastating, and I think that to write a novel in which everything is sweetness and light, sexually among women, is lying. And lies always propagate not only bad literature but bad politics. And losing. People who believe lies lose.

J: At the recent conference, we had a writers' workshop at which we discussed this question of responsibility. Let me suggest something: suppose I write a novel and I see a great tragedy happening to the women's movement, a very bleak picture. I write this and it discourages women from opening presses, writing books--we don't know that novels have that power, but let's just say this one does. Then should I not publish that novel if its immediate effect is to demoralize the women's movement, give ammunition to the male establishment which is nipping at our heels the whole time? Or should it be given to a jury of the women's movement to decide?

- B: No. I don't think that it's possible to write the truth and have it demoralize anybody. The truth is always more important than anything else, in and out of fiction. You write the truth through your flesh and your brain and your experience, through your vision of what's going on. In the doing of it there will be too much paradox, too much irony, too much this and that for it to be a picture of disaster.
- J: The irony is very important--women's capacity for irony. They don't see things as one way or the other. They always see them as very complex, subtle, and interinvolved. You were saying the other night that you missed irony in a recent lesbian-feminist book.
- B: A lot of new lesbian fiction is trying to present what they imagine to be a party line. Too good. Sweetness and light. Say there's a thirteen-year-old girl in Saskatchewan who reads all this new lesbian fiction that "cleans it all up." What the author is doing is to totally disillusion that girl before she's twenty years old. And it divorces her from her own experience--which will teach her that it isn't all sweetness and light.
- J: Makes her feel like a pervert all over again, just like heterosexual fiction used to make us feel. There are all these lesbians out there who never fight, never have insurmountable problems, are never mean--and I'm not one of them. So I'm just as queer now...
- B: Right. So we've got to tell the truth.
- J: I agree with you but I still have another question. Suppose this hypothetical novel is picked up by the New York Times and Publishers Weekly as *the* truth. Now all the rest of the publications of the women's presses have not been picked up...we're being blacked out. *Sinister Wisdom* is being blacked out. But this book, because it says essentially what they want to get across to young women in America--Beware--will be promoted. They'll teach it in women's studies, in high school.
- B: But I think that if you or I or any other lesbian wrote that book, that in the writing of it, it would come across...
- J: In the experience of the language.
- B: In the experience of the language, in the reality of the total emotion. They could not handle it that way. The boys at the New York Times would not be able to use it as propoganda because we're incapable of writing a book

that would have that effect. There's nothing that we could write that they could *use*.

J: That's very good to know.

B: They couldn't use anything.

J: But the women who read it could. They could use all of it.

B: They could do two things at the New York Times: they could say, At last a lesbian novel that gets to the reality of the matter--and they would be covering their asses. If they think something's going to be culturally important they want to get in first. Or they could ignore the lesbian issue and talk about existential reality or they could compare it to Henry James or D.H. Lawrence...they have all these outs when they face literary truths. But the women would have it.

J: At the conference I was talking to a woman from Amazon Reality about--I think it was Norse myths. She was telling us a story: a woman had to marry a man, a foreigner, and take his name. She didn't want to take his name, she wanted him to take her name. She ended up killing their two sons and feeding them to him, at which time he went crazy and she either killed him or he died. And it seemed to us that that story was an old matriarchal tale--you're supposed to go with your mother's family, so if you have to take a male name or go into *his* land those children are really children of rape, are not children. These stories are from the middle period--the beginning period of patriarchy. Another woman from Shroder Music was telling us about a story in which a woman was in love with her horse, wanted to marry her horse, and at the end of the story, the horse turned into a charming man and she married him, naturally.

B: That's what I mean by phallic socialization: the good beast turned into a husband.

J: They're changing the endings of the stories. Do the grandmothers keep telling the stories in their changed version, thinking, hoping that the granddaughters will get the message--since that's the only safe story to tell?

B: I think so. They can't be literal. But they will tell this and if the daughter or granddaughter picks up the reality, good for her. If she doesn't, too bad.

J: So one of the lesbian writer's primary duties or tasks is to write in such a way that each woman reader learns to get in touch with her own source of truth, so that

if the time comes and our tales have their endings changed, women will have within themselves the means, the touchstone, to say, This is the truth and that *they* added. Which gets us to language. They've taken away our language and we've got to restructure, redefine--the words are too abstract--we've got to use language in such a way and lesbian readers have to read it in such a way that it reawakens a much more basic immediate way of communicating. You can't use their language to do that. You have constantly to experiment with the most direct, the most shocking, the most unpeeling kind of language to bring back this bond of communication, because this is going to be our only hope in the future.

B: Exactly. My formula for that in life as well as in writing (and I'm able to do it maybe fifty per cent of the time) is to keep some sort of idea, vision, in my mind... everything that is accepted as good, acceptable, right, no matter who presents it--whether the men do it or the movement or lesbians do it--you turn it around in your head and look at its opposite, and then decide what the good/bad situation is, and then you have a choice of being either good or bad. Of course you have also the choice of going against the mainstream of public opinion, whether it's the establishment or the movement. But I want to get into this whole thing of what lesbian fiction is...I have to ask you a direct question about what you think lesbian fiction is, because there are two opposite extremes in my mind of what it isn't, that have gone like cannonballs through the women's movement in the past few years. At one end of the spectrum is May Sarton, at the other, a little book called *The Ripening Fig*. Both of these I consider the absolute death to any kind of illumination we can get from life or literature. May Sarton is very popular with academics and with women who're looking for a proper lesbian or a distinguished lesbian. I think they're also attracted to her because she's an old woman. *The Ripening Fig* is a campaign in self-promotion. Could you talk about that some?

J: The May Sarton book I guess you're talking about is *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, because in *As We Are Now* that very alive love/lesbian relation between the two old women was denied by the character and the author. I mean the author let the character's denial stand. But in *Mrs. Stevens*, the character uses her lesbianism almost to say, I have the freedom to experiment with this bad wild woman if I get a novel out of it. It's American materialism. Lesbianism is fine for artists because it produces art, it ends up as a product. You're even allowed to commit a murder if that will bring you a work of art--on some level you're allowed. It's the murder that's really passionate, that you do because you want

to kill somebody, that's punished in this society. So I don't know why *Mrs. Stevens* is read as a book for lesbians--and the women I know who like it are young women. Sarton certainly chose for her muse a young man. May Sarton is still playing to the male establishment. I think she wants a double thing going for her: she is a woman and therefore special, but she's not your ordinary commongardenvariety woman. She feels that being a lesbian is a sign of having more male hormones, a male brain--she thinks that's androgynous. Now *The Ripening Fig* is the sort of book I think the CIA could publish in Africa and South America to discredit the whole woman's movement. I don't think I want to say anything more about it.

B: Okay. I use May Sarton--there are others I could use just as well--because she's come home to me lately. She's somebody I read years ago when I knew she was a lesbian writer. There was much that disturbed me about it but at least I had a lesbian novel to read. This connects with our discussion of language, too, and the idea of sensibility. What is the lesbian sensibility? What frightens me is that books like *Mrs. Stevens* and the whole icon of May Sarton create an idea of what sensibility is in literature, and it also separates literature from politics. And women who buy this of course are buying the idea that culture, art, esthetics, etc. are separable entities from political life and what I think the best novelists are trying to do is to do the awesome gruesome frequently backbreaking task of integrating that politics which is moving and changing with an esthetics which is also moving and changing. We don't know but we have to take the risk. I may change my mind next year but it'll be a different book. But it bothers me that lesbians--I'm not surprised about straight women--pick up these icons of lesbian sensibility, at one extreme May Sarton, at the other extreme *The Ripening Fig*--even the title alone of that one you could make jokes about. But what bothers me is ignorance, and I guess that's why I've been in education for so long. That this terrible book, in all senses of the word--its writing, its images, its vision, everything...

J: Its total dishonesty.

B: Total dishonesty. And that women fall for it. What I can't endure is women falling for total dishonesty, in literature. I can't endure it in other places but when they fall for it in literature I really get upset.

J: Don't you think one of the reasons for that is that women have experienced literature as male--it's been shoved down our throats at school and it's always been

difficult because it hasn't related to our lives. So there's an assumption that literature is difficult, not pleasant, and women want something that's easy to read. And *The Ripening Fig* is certainly easy to read--in a sense. It doesn't ask you to put away your last twenty or eighty years of reading malese to try to experience something new. It panders to their language, formula, structure. It tells you what is happening...

B: Yeah. Those are the two extremes that I wanted to bring up. It disturbs me because it means there's no point almost, except a personal need, a political need, in writing what we consider the truth about our experience as feminists, as women, as lesbians, if we can't simultaneously reach women and tell them that they're being conned, on the one hand, by the old establishment-sentimental bullshit of May Sarton and on the other hand by what amounts to vulgar trash--stuff on the level with Playboy, for example.

J: It's disturbing because May Sarton keeps that straddle going; she's never said she's a lesbian. She wants to reach both lesbians and male critics who sell books. The boys say May Sarton is good and women have been told for so long that what the boys say is good, is good. I hoped that our "natural" audience on this thing would be completely over that and would distrust everything that the boys say. When I read in Publishers Weekly that a book is a great lesbian novel, I know it's shit; or that a book is terrible--strident feminism, breast-beating, more of the same old whining--I rush right out and buy it, even though it's published by the boys. But in general I don't trust anything they publish.

B: What do you think a lesbian sensibility might be? In literature.

J: Well, the lesbian's sense of reality has been challenged every single day since she was born, even if she were living as a straight woman as I did for years. Our sharpest weapon, or the instinct we've sharpened most, is getting a grip on--a definition of--our sense of reality. I think we've worked hardest on this. We haven't worked hard on plot, or atmosphere--but I think we've worked our asses off to get down our sense of reality. So I think a lesbian sensibility is a very very heightened awareness of reality.

B: That lesbian sensibility is also about *grabbing* that reality: it may be, for now and for many years, contradictory, it may be painful, it may be impossibly odd. But when I think of a real lesbian novelist working, I think that what she's after is getting some shred of that reality back, that lost reality, which you have to

go back to girlhood to find.

J: You can't have a character walk into a room and say, This woman was so beautiful that I fell in love with her--as if we don't fall in love with women whether or not they are beautiful. As if love, sex, the cunt-itch, has to do with the fact that she looks like Susan Sontag. Yet we still do that. We've got to find new words for beauty, for cunt-itch, for love, lust. We've got to talk about lust as opposed to the feelings we have that are friendship. We've got to deal with the fact that we feel mainly friendship feelings for certain women but occasionally we feel lust toward them too--which we probably act on if we're young and don't if we're old. Or maybe it's just the opposite. We have to say all that.

B: We've got to find a way to say that in fiction, and there's no formula. There's no tradition of saying it. That's what makes writing a novel as a lesbian from this point of view so difficult.

J: So interesting.

B: Interesting and difficult.

J: Because the boys never did that. They would only wonder why, when they have a perfect wife, they have a prick-itch for a beautiful woman, or why they're attracted to bad people, and stuff like that. We have to do that also. We have to discuss things like the fact that our baby dykes who can do no wrong find themselves attracted to women who're embracing the bad. At the same time we have to deal with the fact that there's no such thing as beauty, or love, or...there's no such thing as anything. That's where the lesbian writer starts.

B: We're inventing the world.

J: Right.

---

# Fear of FLYING?

————— julia p. stanley

Two years ago Elinor Langer published her review of Kate Millett's *Flying* in *Ms.* magazine. The review itself tells us more about Langer's state of mind than it does about *Flying*, and the same is probably true of this article. That a book can call forth such passionate appraisal, however, testifies to its stature and the power of its contents. I hardly know where to begin, and, after two years, readers may wonder why it is still important to me to expose Langer's review article. There are two answers to that question: (1) I think Kate Millett's *Flying* is one of the artistic achievements of the twentieth century; (2) Elinor Langer's attack on the book illustrates the contradictions, paradoxes, false claims, and self-righteousness typical of criticism written from a patriarchal perspective. Rather than justify my own judgment that *Flying* represents the best literature in our century, I have chosen to analyze the ways in which Langer's review exemplifies the worst aspects of the male critical traditions. Among the tasks of feminism, one of them is the on-going analysis and examination of the values of patriarchal culture, and the ways in which these values influence our judgments of ourselves and other women. In *Sexual Politics* Kate contributed one of the first extensive feminist analyses of patriarchal values in literature. In *Flying* she turned her analytical abilities to herself, her life, her friends, her lovers, to the movement in which she struggles for herself. The statements that derive from both stances are valuable to us. It is past time to consider the responsibilities of a feminist critical position if we are to rescue our writers from the judgments rendered by those critics who continue to serve patriarchal literary values. I think that the traditional function of the critic--as judge and mediator of aesthetic values in the culture--may be obsolete. Perhaps this is optimism on my part; certainly such critics would be the last to admit that they have no function. As long as people like Elinor Langer take it upon themselves to judge books according to prevailing masculinist attitudes and the aesthetic that embodies these attitudes, those of us who are willing should endeavor to expose the sources of their critical statements.

The title of Langer's essay, "Confessing," makes explicit the direction her attack will take. The editorial comment immediately beneath the title sets the tone for the review. "In the June, 1974, issue of *Ms.*, we published a long excerpt from *Flying*, Kate Millett's latest book. The

following essay raises some questions about the genre of writing exemplified by *Flying*; questions which are important to feminist writers and readers alike." Set off in the middle of the page so that the reader's eye is immediately drawn to it is a quote from the essay: "Confession protects. By pretending we are presenting 'life,' not art, we avoid criticism." The dichotomy presented to us here accurately represents the attitude of Langer's criticism. Life, she maintains, is not "art," although she never defines "art" for us, and she does not seem to feel that this dichotomy merits justification. The first two paragraphs of Langer's article illustrate the self-righteous tone that pervades the review:

Men repress; women confess. The stiff upper lip versus the quavering one. There are occasions when too much of the latter makes the former seem attractive, and for me reading Kate Millett's *Flying* was one of them. After it, I would cheerfully have settled down with the *Principia*. As it was, I reached for the Kleenex, my sorrow not only for the author of this modern pilgrim's progress, but for its readers.

Confession, under the auspices of the Women's Movement, is getting to be a messy business. This is as good a time as any to bring it up.<sup>1</sup>

If Langer really believed that the tone of *Flying* was comparable to a "quavering" lip, she is not what one might call a "careful" reader.

Having been trained in the tradition of male criticism, I'm finally tired of reading and hearing about the "triviality" of "confessional" writing and its "debased" character as a literary genre unworthy of critical attention. Thanks to Elinor Langer, I've realized that I learned my disdain for "confessional" writing from the male critics who praise male authors who write for male audiences. Of course, *disdain* may be too strong a word, because I simply did not pay attention to so-called "confessional" literature. While I read diaries and journals outside of my classes as a leisure activity, such works were not taught as part of "our" literary tradition, a critical negligence that created an unnoticed gap between what I read and what I called "literature." In short, if most of us don't, or *can't*, take "confessional" literature seriously, it is because of the male value system that has structured our personal, intellectual, and aesthetic judgments.

As the existence of Langer's review testifies, it is past time for us to examine the cultural biases of the aesthetics we have learned, to re-evaluate the literature handed down to us by patriarchal institutions, and to consider the possible features of a feminist aesthetic. I have as yet no general understanding of what a "feminist aesthetics" might look like, although I don't think it would obviate critical judgments. Judgments would be based on the

value of a literary work in feminist terms--that is, a given work would be judged according to the ways it illuminates and captures the hopes and struggles of women. Because this positive definition is necessarily vague, perhaps a close examination of Langer's critical judgments will make clear what a feminist aesthetics is *not*. Her exploitation of the term *confessional* is a good place to start.

Historically, literary tradition has excluded most "confessional" authors from the ranks of the "respectable," "serious" writers, and Langer has written within this tradition. (I'll continue to use the term *confessional*, in quotation marks, in order to make clear my objections to the term. However, as I hope to show, there is no such genre as "confessional" literature; the term "confessional" is a label for a category created to condemn those works that are classified as such. *Flying*, according to Kate Millett, "refuses and eludes any literary category,..."<sup>2</sup>) Critical evaluations have always gone against "confessional" literature when judgments on it have been offered, and we need to ask why this is so. Millett herself has asked *why* Langer chose the label "confession" as a "route to condemn." I would suggest that Langer chose it because it is the easiest way to dismiss literature that one finds disturbing; "confession" is the ready-to-hand label provided by masculinist aesthetics for those works that force too personal, too immediate a confrontation between author and reader. This unmasking of the self as author and character, this face-to-face meeting of artist and reader, arouses repulsion and disdain in literary critics trained in the aesthetics of the male tradition. I would like to suggest that there are at least two sources for the pejorative features of the term *confession*: one derives from the religious associations attached to the word, and the other is manifested in the kinds of literature regarded as "serious" by male critics, i.e. fiction. A third possibility may stem from the fact that "confessional" literature does not require the "mid-wifery" of the critic as mediator between artist and reader, and thus eludes critical obfuscation.

The label *confession* has been taken over by critics as a means of condemning works of art that are accessible to the reader. The term is less descriptive and more pejorative than we've been led to believe. If one asks a critic to define the characteristics of "confessional" literature as a *genre*, the answer can only be found in the long list of works already cast into that category, not by title, but by authorship. "Confessional" literature is usually, but not always, written by women, about the lives of women in the uncomfortable first person. The label "confessional" functions as a limitation, implying that the works so categorized lack "scope." That is, critics would have us believe that "confessional" literature is so personal in its content, so specific in its telling, that its value as literature does not extend beyond its covers. Even as the world inhabited by women is limited by the terms of men, so

our perceptions and lives are dismissed as "trivial." Consider the way in which Langer uses *confession*: "The confession is not disciplined autobiography. In autobiography, the writer may use the self to inspect the world; in confession, the self runs rampantly through it, crashing up against everything in its way. Everything is seen through the filter of ego." Well, one might ask, what isn't? In another vein, I wonder whether Langer would have had the same things to say about the confessions of Rousseau or St. Augustine, and I think that her distinction between autobiography and confession is only expedient.

The religious associations attached to the term *confession* can be traced to the Catholic ritual in which the penitent seeks absolution from "the father" for real or imagined "sins." The roles, as they are defined and enacted in this ritual, reflect their function in maintaining the oppressive structures created by males. The penitent, the one who must seek forgiveness, has *transgressed*, or *violated*, the "father's" *law*. In seeking absolution for one's transgressions, one *submits* oneself to that law, acknowledging the power and control of the church as represented by its male priests. Only males can function as confessors, as the representatives of their "heavenly father" here on earth. Of course, males can absolve themselves and each other, while women must "seek" absolution from them, being incapable of absolving one another. In the male cosmology, women, as subordinate and inferior in spiritual matters, must go to the "other," i.e. men, if we are to have a place in a patriarchal "after-life." Langer, by characterizing *Flying* as "confessional," can imply that Kate has done something embarrassing and inappropriate for which transgression she is in need of absolution. As Langer herself describes her reaction: "I find *Flying* as pitiful as I found *Sexual Politics* brilliant;... Confession, self-revelation, and subjectivity, all instruments of insight and development and experimentation when they occur within small groups, or writing classes, or are explored in private journals, can look shabby--even indecent when they appear on the public shelves, where both literary and moral-political judgments must be made if the public side of life is to have any integrity at all. When you write a book--as opposed to speaking with a friend--you properly invite the highest ethical and aesthetic judgments of human society upon your efforts." Such revelations must be kept in the privacy of the confessional booth, and Kate has transgressed.

Langer couches her attack in the terms of "the highest ethical and aesthetic judgments of society," thus aligning herself with male critical tradition. Or has she? I've already mentioned the confessions of St. Augustine and Rousseau, and Langer seems to have forgotten the ecstatic religious poems of John Donne and the "terrible" sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Consider, too, the frankly autobiographical writings by men that have *not* been categorized or trivialized as "confessional" within the male literary tra-

dition. When men examine the pain and joy of their intense experiences, their work is not cast into the "confessional" waste bin. Such works are among the most acclaimed pieces of literature. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is called an "epic." Henry Thoreau's *Walden* is a "utopian blueprint." And both authors are usually classed as "transcendentalists," a term that should merit further discussion elsewhere. Or, compare the literary treatment of e.e. cummings, Hart Crane, or Dylan Thomas to that accorded Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, or Sylvia Plath. Are the poems of the males any *less* "personal" (confessional) than those of the women? Yet, only recently have the women begun to be acknowledged as competent in the literary world. The favorite ploy used to maintain masculinist aesthetics is to dismiss the work of women as "confessional," while the lyrics of men are praised and passed on to future generations as "universal" statements to be treasured and preserved. Clearly, when a male writer has received the endorsement of male critics, his statements are accepted as "universal truths," utterances which will bear the scrutiny of generations of male readers. When a woman writes about love, or any other aspect of her life, she is dismissed as a "confessional" writer, and her "out-pourings" aren't even worth the paper they're printed on, when they do get published.

Elinor Langer has behind her review the weight of several centuries of male criticism, a fact that lends her criticism a certain credibility, especially to those who are unwilling, or unable, to grant that the Western tradition of literary criticism exists only to endorse and perpetuate those works that embody the values of the prevailing patriarchal culture.

If men have had a monopoly on literature and its presentation, particularly that literature that fills the tedious hours of sophomore literature courses, it is appropriate to ask *how* they have organized and maintained this monopoly. On the political side, of course, they have been able to maintain their dominance in literature because they control the resources and methodologies of power and always have. But the political response, while valid, presents an oversimplified answer that disguises the subtleties involved. While it is true that women have not had access to education and, thereby, literacy, till recently, if we stop at this point we will fail to recognize that the external structure draws its coercive power from the value system that has held off women for centuries. Getting power is one thing; maintaining it is another affair that requires a complex system capable of repeating itself indefinitely. In fact, the system itself is easy to delimit, but exploring all the ways it has permeated our lives and perceptions is a much larger task. Nevertheless, the masculinist aesthetics is one of the obvious ways that the male value system repeats itself. Men have used their power to define the "proper scope" of literature, and their perceptions have structured an aesthetics that endorses their perceptions as universal truths.

Among the artistic modes that men have used to maintain their interpretation of the world is *fiction*. Supposedly, fiction is characteristically a fabricated universe that reflects the world; it is something "not real" that contains "truth." There has never been much doubt among literary critics that literature is based on life experiences to varying degrees. The exact degree and nature of that relationship has, of course, provided much of the fodder for "paper wars," and the revolutions which periodically legitimize one of the competing theories of literature that evolves out of these battles. It would be ridiculous to maintain that male writers have not used their experiences as the basis of their literature, although the more successful the writer at disguising his own involvement, the more "meritorious" the art thus produced. By this criterion, *Ulysses* is a shoo-in for the "great novel" of the twentieth century. And it is fair to ask in this context why *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and *Moby Dick* have been passed off as universal in scope, while *Flying* is condemned by a single label, "confessional." I think that the term *confessional* isolates those works of art that do not permit *distance*.

Langer herself has some trouble in her condemnation of *Flying*, because there is distance, but not enough for her taste. On the one hand, she characterizes the act of writing a book as "a professional activity, like running a dress shop or a kennel. It is a business...A book is a work of language, nothing else. It is not flesh and it is not time. It is not life. Long as this book is, it is shorter than Millett's year. It is *not* her year. It is conscious and contrived, each word a literary choice as much as--even more than--an emotional one." Yet, having correctly pointed to the fact that *Flying* is a conscious work of literature, *art*, she tries to have it the other way, too. "She has recorded all her impressions, but she takes responsibility for none. Free association has supplanted thought...Clarification, new ideas, would have more value than a seismographic record of all the orgasms in history. Millett could think it through, but won't. She will only tell how it feels: shitty. 'Thinking' for her is no more." How, I ask, can one construct a conscious and precise work of art, without "thinking"? Clearly, Langer is referring to the male definition of "thought" as the only possibility; she is dissatisfied because there is not enough "objectivity," not enough "distance," for her aesthetic standards, which she characterizes as "the highest ethical and aesthetic judgments of human society." What is the purpose of these judgments? At least one answer lies in Langer's combination of the words *ethical* and *aesthetic*. How did these two terms come to be so intimately associated?

Most of the male writers usually thought of as the "great" writers *fictionalize* their experience, thus raising it to the level of "art." By making their lives into fictions, they avoid the hardships and pitfalls of honesty, in

the process establishing "distance" between themselves and their audience. Fiction, the untrue telling of one's perceptions and interpretations of experience, creates a mode within which men have been able to establish their interpretations of life as "universal truth." Obviously, only in fiction are "universals" possible, only in the fiction of men do we find claims about the "human condition," which are really portrayals only of the *male* condition. (Women in these fictionalized accounts function as decorative back-grounds against which male fantasies of power and infantilism are enacted as "art.") The "alienated hero" is the perfect example of the male version of the "human condition." Within such fictions we find the perceptions and experiences of men presented as abstractions which embody traditional male theories about the nature and structure of the universe. For example, the male concept of tragedy typically centers on some man of exceptional social status who is incapable of seeing himself as he is, in fact, someone who *refuses* to understand reality. Meanwhile, women appear and disappear in these little dramas, either as the "evil" woman who leads the "hero" astray, or as the supportive character who keeps trying to tell him what is *really* happening, but whom he assiduously ignores in order to act out his tragedy. (Consider *Oedipus Rex* and the *Agamemnon*, or for that matter, *The Dangling Man*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, or anything else you can think of.) Since men conceived and created the "world view" we need not be surprised if male critics are only too willing to promote their view as "universal." Nor should we be taken by surprise when men dismiss the writing of women as merely "confessional," or "limited," or too personal to be of any importance as "art." Kate Millett did not establish enough distance between herself and her readers in *Flying*; that is her transgression. She is not alienated from her life; she is too intensely involved in her perceptions and emotions. The danger of such involvement, especially for the critic, is the *passion* of such literature, and the term "confession" provides one way of establishing a comfortable distance for oneself.

Thus far, I have discussed two possible reasons for Langer's use of the label "confession" as the focus of her attack on *Flying*: the religious associations with "sin" and "transgression" that the term permits, and the male literary tradition that needs to deny the artistic value of the literature produced by women. The third possibility I've suggested is the consequence of intense and personal literature for criticism itself, and Langer states the situation herself.

She [Kate Millett] has made criticism of the book's content impossible. Everything one might think to say about it, she has said herself...How does one criticize the sad, true, tragic-comic and egocentric material that is the heart of most private journals? What is a reader to say? Where is the opportunity

for discussing either style or values?...The critic is either silenced or hypocritical...How artificial to demand a subject when the subject is the self.

The creators of works of literature like *Flying* make the function of the critic obsolete. The actions and emotions of the work are immediately available to the reader, and there is no need for the friendly intervention of the critic as guide or explicator. Langer's justification for her review is at stake here, since *Flying* doesn't require her discussion of style, although her essay is a study in itself of "values." As long as men recreate their lives on paper as abstractions, as "fictions," there is plenty of room for the parasitic critic to live between the lines, filling up yet more pages with additional abstractions peddled variously as "explications," "explanations," "keys." The more successfully males conceal themselves in their symbolic and allegorical literatures, the more securely entrenched is the critic as the only "educated reader" of such stuff. It is true, as Langer has observed, that "The critic is either silenced or hypocritical" when confronted with intense writing. The presentation of one's life as art has its own inherent profundities, a fact that doesn't leave much room for critical intrusions and misrepresentations.

By refusing to deny the authenticity of her interior experience, by refusing the abstract, Kate Millett has forced critics to deal with the content of *Flying* as essentially real, and most critics have had no preparation for describing realities. It's much simpler to toy with Platonic "ideals," Swedenborgian cosmologies, Christian angelology. Fiction permits the creation of more fictions; indeed, it necessitates more fictions, and calls them forth.

Such are the consequences of the masculinist aesthetics, the "genuine" tradition which Langer calls upon in order to attack *Flying*. And there is one additional element in Langer's review that might have given rise to the vehemence of her attack: only the masculinist tradition could have provided Langer with the self-righteousness to call the love scenes in *Flying* "pornography." At one point, Langer claims that it "was not so much the pornography, or the book's betrayal of personal relationships, as the politics, Millett's refusal to countenance and record the grave events that occur outside her own body." Earlier in the essay, part of the evidence Langer offers for her observation that "the book is false" derives from her parallel claim that Millett's voice in *Flying* is not her own. "The literary voice that she says is her own is a voice I have heard before: it is Joyce Stein Lawrence Mailer. *Flying* is heavily pornographic, and I swear the model is Mailer's short story, 'The Time of Her Time.'" In addition, then, to Langer's use of the term *confession* without sufficient justification, she also used the word *pornographic* in her effort to denigrate *Flying*. At no point does she attempt to define her use of the word, nor does she justify its application to Millett's work, and,

by comparing Millett's style to "Joyce Stein Lawrence Mailer" she has simply revealed that she has an untrained literary ear.

Is the charge of "pornographic" serious enough to merit consideration? I would answer "yes" for two reasons. First, the label is not applicable to what Millett has written. Second, I am curious to know why Henry Miller's novels have come to be called "art"; how could anyone regard his descriptions of his sexual encounters with women as anything *but* pornographic? Yet, if Kate Millett describes making love with a woman, Langer calls it "pornographic." There is a discrepancy in the application of the term to what I regard as two different points of view. In an effort to illustrate these differences, the two following quotations (the first from Miller, the second from Millett) are offered for reader comparison. Although some of the words are identical, notice particularly the difference in tone and sentence structure, and the ways the individuals described relate to each other.

I would ask her to prepare the bath for me. She would pretend to demur but she would do it just the same. One day, while I was seated in the tub soaping myself, I noticed that she had forgotten the towels. 'Ida,' I called, 'bring me some towels!' She walked into the bathroom and handed me them. She had on a silk bathrobe and a pair of silk hose. As she stooped over the tub to put the towels on the rack her bathrobe slid open. I slid to my knees and buried my head in her muff. It happened so quickly that she didn't have time to rebel or even to pretend to rebel. In a moment I had her in the tub, stockings and all. I slipped the bathrobe off and threw it on the floor. I left the stockings on--it made her more lascivious looking, more the Cranach type. I lay back and pulled her on top of me. She was just like a bitch in heat, biting me all over, panting, gasping, wriggling like a worm on the hook. As we were drying ourselves, she bent over and began nibbling at my prick. I sat on the edge of the tub and she kneeled at my feet gobbling it. After a while, I made her stand up, bend over; then I let her have it from the rear. She had a small juicy cunt, which fitted me like a glove. I bit the nape of her neck, the lobes of her ears, the sensitive spot on her shoulder, and as I pulled away I left the mark of my teeth on her beautiful white ass. Not a word spoken.<sup>3</sup>

Coaxing her stroking her, my enemy the *New York Times* crinkling underneath, then sliding to the floor. But if she is loath it is hopeless. Even now giving in to me, raising herself upon her side her hand finding me, always she wishes to take me first, serving me. I am slower to heat, whereas she is always ready, open to me. I must doubt it, even this, her hand on my breast will she touch the nipple with exquisite care, feels

like it connects to the clitoris begins the heat between my legs. Should I not take her first, give myself time? Shouldn't we take turns who is first? Though she laughs at me, 'Do you want to keep score on the wall?' 'Equity,' I would lecture, but her tongue whispers in my ear, 'Shut up. Take your clothes off.' How I adore her orders, loving to be bullied by her. What sick thought is this, or is it that final safety with her, bewildered at the joy in her hand searching me, opening me to her fingers upon the lips of my other mouth wet making little noises, silence to be filled with her tongue while she sifts me, reams, files, selects, and plays upon the nerve like a button pressed all heat flooding out I open wider to receive her will split myself take her whole up to the elbow, straining in hope. I love the way you move as I move dancing under your hand's power deep in me shaking when you press hard fast against the wall deep like a storm in me. I must stop breathing, so fierce you are. So powerful. Coming, dragged even, making no effort, believe only in what she does, cease to give directions from your mind spoken or strained in thought ESP of the will give over and follow be taken, hurled by a hand shaking the fear one hopes for, away from the Ferris wheel, then when it plummets terror you are the uncontrolled, taken to the place beyond thought or knowing.<sup>4</sup>

While it is untrue, as Langer has charged, that Millett did not record "the grave events outside her own body," she does stay in her body for much of the book. Millett does not take it upon herself to "get into" the minds of the other people involved, and the quoted love scene is typical of the way she tells us only what *she* knows. She does not presume to record the other woman's experience of her own sexuality. The passage from Miller's *Sexus* contrasts with Kate's meticulous respect. At no point does Miller tell us what *he* experienced, nor does he seem to care what the woman *feels*. (For example, he mentions that "she didn't have time to rebel or even pretend to rebel.") Except for the sentence in which Ida is described as a "bitch in heat," Miller describes what he does *to* her. The scene from *Sexus* typifies the literature of male porno-violence in which distance and "objectivity" figure importantly.

Elinor Langer, in justifying her attack on *Flying*, has reminded us "of the absence of a genuinely critical tradition in the Women's Movement." I haven't the time here to explore what she might mean by "genuinely," but I think the body of this article provides an outline of what she might mean. As for tradition, we haven't had the time to develop "traditions," so we needn't torture ourselves for that failing. Nevertheless, the publication of Langer's review demonstrates that we cannot regard criticism as "feminist" because a woman has written it. We do need a consistent critical approach to our literature that is based on feminist prin-

ciples and values. The existing vacuum invites the likes of Elinor Langer, who would use our space to vilify one of our finest authors, to wish for *Flying* "a speedy oblivion." To say such a thing is, of course, to wish Kate Millett oblivion--her life, her actions, her words, her feelings.

Langer concludes her review by telling Kate that "Not all confessions end in absolution," as though that had been Kate's purpose in writing *Flying*. *Flying* is not a "confession"; Langer's sole reason for invoking the male critical tradition through that term is that it gives her an excuse for refusing to "absolve" Kate. That is, Langer hit on a means of negating Kate's art and her life.

I do not believe that there is such a genre as "confession" literature. As I have suggested, the label is simply handy for dismissing art that the critic wishes to trivialize. Erica Jong has much the same opinion. In an interview with the *New York Quarterly*, she was asked how she felt about confessional poetry. She responded: "There is no such thing as confessional poetry. Anne Sexton gets branded with that and it's absurd. I think it's become a putdown term for women, a sexist label for women's poetry. People who use the term are falling into the subject-matter fallacy. Subject matter doesn't make a poem. And so a critic who uses that term is showing his [sic] total ignorance of what poetry is about."<sup>5</sup> The same observation holds true for those who use the term *confessional* to damn any work of art.

---

An earlier version of this paper was prepared with the idea that *Ms.* magazine would publish it as a response to Elinor Langer's review of *Flying*. The editors of *Ms.*, however, refused to allocate pages of their magazine for such a rebuttal, although they allowed Kate Millett to answer in their "Letters" section (January, 1975). I would like to acknowledge my debt to all the women who read early versions of this article and offered me their own observations. My special thanks to Ginny Apuzzo for her comments on confession in Catholicism and its function in patriarchal culture, and to Moira Ferguson for suggesting that I use the Henry Miller passage quoted in *Sexual Politics* and for bringing the interview with Erica Jong to my attention.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. "Confession," *Ms.*, III (December, 1974), pp. 69-71; 108. All subsequent quotations from Langer are taken from this source.
2. "The Shame is Over," *Ms.*, III (January, 1975), pp. 27-28.
3. Henry Miller, *Sexus*, as quoted in *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 3.
4. Millett, *Flying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), pp. 480-.
5. "Interview with Erica Jong," *Here Comes and Other Poems* (New York: New American Library, 1975), p. 26.

*"The feminist is by definition a critic."*

-Pamella Farley

**REVIEWS**

## WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM IN THE MOVEMENT?

JOAN LARKIN: Books like Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* contain passages of criticism, and are important for evaluating and putting material into a perspective that is supportive. Criticism must not pit us competitively against one another--that kind of measurement-consciousness is patriarchal. I don't mean that we shouldn't have standards for ourselves. But criticism cannot be trashing, which it is too much of the time in the male press. It should be, for us, a way of learning to listen to each other more effectively. And an opportunity for us *as critics* to tell what place women's writing has in our lives, not in an intellectual or aesthetic vacuum.

JAN CLAUSEN: I believe a feminist critic should bring to her work a receptivity to unfamiliar voices and new forms, combined with a love of language, a delight in figuring out *how* literature works--all this in addition to the authentic commitment to women and their work which makes her a feminist. She should not shrink from offering negative as well as positive reactions, but must avoid the destructive, senseless ranking procedures ("While not a great writer in the sense that Sophocles, Shakespeare and Joyce are great, X is worth reading...") so characteristic of establishment criticism. She should be willing to regard critically her own critical function, guarding on one hand against favoring work which bears an establishment seal of approval, and on the other against knee-jerk anti-intellectualism. Beyond this, I believe we can only learn what feminist criticism is by engaging in it.

SUSAN SHERMAN: I helped start a magazine, *IKON*, in the middle '60s precisely over this issue. A quote, "There is no longer a place for the professional critic, the professional observer. There is no longer a place for the uninvolved. But this does not mean there is no place for judgment, observation, dialogue. Information that can serve as an impetus to action, not divorced from, but irrevocably a part of our involvement in this world, this present moment in which we find ourselves as participator and participant." This in 1965 as an artist, but certainly even more today, in 1977, as a woman.

PAMELLA FARLEY: Our responsibility as feminist critics is to put things together: audience, writer, and work as they collide in history, which is our lives. The critic gives us another perspective for our time. She, too, is a writer.

## WHY PRACTICE CRITICISM?

LYNDALL COWAN: We need to say honestly what is good and what is bad, and why; we need to learn to give honest support. Part of it, too, is simply getting the word out, recording history. We've been denied a history and a means to talk to one another for too damned long. (About a year and a half ago I found out that there were over 2,000 "Lesbian" books instead of 10, and was shocked, and was ANGRY.) So....

BARBARA GRIER: The function of the critic is to bring the book to the reader and the reader to the book. Practiced well, it should be little more than annotated book listings. It is a terrible arrogance for reviewers who have never written a book to presume to be capable of saying that a book is "good" or "bad" and/or to analyze styles of writing. Novelists and poets cannot help but be at least moderately kind (or weak) in their reviewing, for they know the agony of creation. And non-writers who sound off pompously lack the grace of humility in front of work they themselves cannot do.

RITA MAE BROWN: Why practice criticism? If you've tried everything else and failed, criticism is the last hope of a liberal arts educated woman. It allows you the pretension of intelligence. You get to read books without paying for them and better, you enjoy the revenge of the mediocre. You can slash a good writer publicly, harm her career and slow down her next novel. You, meanwhile, are safe from a similar attack because you produce no work of your own, just criticism. If you get really good at it you can also receive bribes to pen favorable reviews. You then get a double treat: you can refuse the bribe thereby demonstrating your higher instincts (publicly, naturally) or you can take the bribe (privately) and buy yourself a pearl-handled stiletto. I think criticism is a marvelous career, matched only by electoral politics.

LYNDALL COWAN: Reviewing is a process for me, too. I've been bred to the male academic "literary elite" where criticism is, more often than not, disguised competition and trashing. Recently a friend told me that "book reviewing is learning to love," and I am finding that is true.

---

## FEMINIST CRITICISM.

RHEA JACOBS: What do you do with a bad book? Besides, who are you to call a book bad? Considering my meager talents as a writer, I feel I have no right to knock anyone else. Nonetheless, I've read a whole lot of books whose badness has disgusted me, and I feel some obligation to share my feelings.

DEENA METZGER: The purpose of criticism is to explore and discover...it is not to condemn, judge or to create fads or false circulation. Criticism can function to create the bond between artwork and audience, so that each exists in a common culture. Women's criticism would, I hope, connect the work to the real lives (personal, public, spiritual) of those to whom the work is addressed. Criticism would be a bridge.

MELANIE KAYE: Criticism is one form of propaganda (literally: things to be transplanted, spread), one way in which I can share my thoughts about other thoughts. In a world transformed according to our best visions, the function of criticism would be essentially the same; only a little less defensive.

---

#### IN A WOMAN'S WORLD, WHAT WOULD BECOME OF CRITICISM?

FRANCES DOUGHTY: For me, a non-question. We're so profoundly shaped by this culture we can't even see most of its effects on us. How can we guess what kinds of souls a woman's world would produce? If we want criticism, we'll have it, in whatever form(s) suit us.

JULIA STANLEY: I think critics will become obsolete because the words of women speak to other women; there is no need for a mediator between us. Right now, those of us who write criticism can facilitate the transition by making the works of our authors known to each other, and by rebutting attacks on them in journals like *MS*.

BEVERLY TANENHAUS: In a woman's world, we could joyfully pursue what it is we're saying without the necessity to philosophically discredit the male superstars who have overshadowed our lives. I see less censorship--publicly through a biased media and personally through suppressed anecdote--where we have liberated ourselves from our secrets and the anonymous woman is heard with the story of her life.

# WE KNOW WHAT WE WANT

————— pat califia

## *"LESBIAN LITERATURE MEETS THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION"*

Because the dominant culture insists that lesbianism is a waste of any sensible woman's time, and a perversion to boot, there is tremendous pressure on lesbian women to always be emotionally healthy and sexually successful. Any admission that we might want more information about our sexuality or have problems in bed just like other folks can be seized upon as "proof" that when two women make love, nothing really important is happening. Maybe that's why it has taken so long for erotica and sex education materials to emerge as respectable topics in lesbian letters. Prior to 1975, we wrote about our childhoods and politics and vegetarianism and politics and haircuts and politics and police harassment of our bars and politics--but we almost never wrote explicitly about our sexuality. The prevailing myth was that because all lesbians are women, we "intuitively" and "naturally" know how to please each other sexually. Anyone who wrote about sex or tried to talk about it was viewed with suspicion. Were they trying to betray us to the hets? Were they trying to commercialize our sexuality and rip it off the way pornography had for so long? Who wanted to talk about lesbian sexuality when there were more important issues--vital concerns like abortion and childcare!

What this did to sex was make it a big secret we were all supposed to be in on. If you had a question about in-orgasmia or venereal disease or masturbation, you were stuck. You could suffer in silence, risk asking a friend, or try sifting through medical textbooks or pornography in hope of finding pearls among the trash.

None of these alternatives was likely to be very helpful. When I came out in 1971, I was perfectly capable of speaking on gay liberation to a roomful of hostile Psych 101 students, but I couldn't figure out how to reach orgasm with a lover. I tried putting up with it, slipping from woman to woman in quest of the Magic Tongue, and only gained a reputation for being the one to ask if you wanted to be

brought out. I eventually gathered my courage into the palm of my (sweating) hand and asked a friend, a woman who had been out for 30 years, what in the world I could do about this...failing of mine. She stared into her beer, then raised her head and looked deep into my eyes. I trembled. Finally--"Are you sure you're gay?" she demanded.

Traditional sources--and I include pornography as well as the social "sciences"--are so distorted by heterosexist bias that they are guaranteed to frighten the hell out of anyone in quest of knowledge or help. In the public library you will find shitpiles of catchy phrases like "sublimated maternal instinct" (kissing a woman's breasts), "narcissism" (you're both 21 and blonde), and "fear of penetration" (there's no other reason to like cunnilingus). In the dirty book stores, you are confronted with wornout ladies in soiled pastel lingerie strapping dildoes on each other. Porno and psychology are both used as weapons against women, threatening and insulting us and explaining us away.

Even some of the more "liberated" sex education material to come out has not been particularly relevant or helpful to lesbian women.

In *Liberating Masturbation* Betty Dodson writes almost exclusively for and about women who relate sexually to men. She limits her comments about lesbianism to the statement that, "If you are homosexual and monogamous the same problems of the romantic ideal will hold true. In some ways the gay sisters have to deal with a double romantic image that each woman brings to the relationship." This is only a half-truth. Most lesbian women would say we are more oppressed by the heterosexual romantic ideal than our own. Dodson does not deal with the rewards of monogamy for two women or its value as a survival unit in a society hostile to lesbians. She does admit (it seems rather grudgingly) that "relations with another woman can be a reasonable alternative for some women," which implies that heterosexuality is the first choice. *Liberating Masturbation* does a great job of giving support for pleasuring oneself and clearly outlines the ways out society puts down autoeroticism for women. But don't try to get any support from it for being a lesbian.

Lonnie Garfield Barbach (in *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality*) at least has the guts to clearly state, "A few women were in homosexual relationships, but most were in heterosexual relationships and the language of the book reflects this bias." It's still annoying to have to mentally change the pronoun "he" to "she" so often. This probably discouraged some gay women from enrolling in pre-orgasmic women's groups.

Dykes must finally have gotten tired of this internal editing and realized that when something has to be done right, you do it yourself. Many gay women are moving to create a new definition of erotica and disseminate positive, accurate information about lesbianism. Lesbians have begun to speak graphically about our fantasies, concerns, turn-

ons, needs, techniques, kinks and options. We have begun to tell the truth about our sexuality to each other.

The foremother of this new literature is *Loving Women*, a warm and witty book authored by The Nomadic Sisters. The book itself is pretty and well-made, printed in brown ink on cocoa-colored paper, wonderfully illustrated by Victoria Hammond. The authors state, "We wish to reiterate our recommendation for enjoying all those things which feel good to you and your partner. Uptightness or moral judgment regarding any technique that is enjoyed by women can only add to the already long years of sexual oppression of women."

Because of this nonjudgmental philosophy, *Loving Women* is a manual of all the techniques The Nomadic Sisters could think of for masturbation and sex with a partner. Different positions, solutions to possible difficulties, and brief comments by other women are included. The book ends with four sexual experiences, lovingly detailed. If you've always wanted to read something sexy to your partner but couldn't find something that wouldn't gross her out, one of these might do nicely.

The book would be incomplete, however, without Victoria Hammond's drawings. There are gleeful orgasms, moments of tenderness, rapt concentration on a partner's pleasure, sadness and self-consciousness--all the shades of feeling possible during lovemaking. Victoria portrays so many different kinds of women that it is impossible to emerge with a stereotyped picture of a lesbian.

The most consciousness-raising jolt I have experienced since *The Feminine Mystique* was on the very first page, in the glossary. "Penis" is defined as "a dildo substitute."

I do have a few quibbles with *Loving Women*. The fact that The Nomadic Sisters don't reveal their names seems to suggest that the freedom and openness they advocate cannot exist outside the bedroom. I also think some information about anatomy and physiology would have been useful; specifically, a diagram of the female genitals and a full description of the female sexual response cycle.

Less well-known is *What Lesbians Do*, printed by Jackrabbit Women's Printshop and distributed by the Amazon Reality Collective of Eugene, Oregon. If you should happen upon a copy, open it quickly, before the horrible maroon-and-silly-putty cover gives you terminal eye strain. It will be worth your while to browse through the poetry, graphics, cartoons, prose and photographs. You are bound to find something you will like. Unfortunately, you are bound to find something you hate, too, because the quality of *What Lesbians Do* is very uneven--which is to say that some of it could have been left in private notebooks or simply thrown away.

Of the score of women who contributed to *What Lesbians Do*, only a few can be mentioned here. Pamela Lupe's work is always good and sometimes exquisite. She draws women in their pleasures with delicate, suggestive lines, achieving a powerful erotic effect. Marilyn Gayle's poetry is a natural, honest voice that shares with us the jealousy, triumph and anger of loving women. Most of the other poets

also have a direct and simple style. Through their work, we recognize our own bedroom jokes and whimsy, and hear our own moments of awkwardness, deceit and bliss expressed.

Some of my other favorites include a fierce, archetypal cunt by Tracy Lilian, a cartoon captioned "Lesbians Do More than Just Make Love," the drawings of cats which perch with great self-satisfaction atop any available ass, and "After the Bar or Young Love," by Chicken.

The nice thing is that you can buy both *LW* and *WLD* without wasting your money because they are completely different. *The Cunt Coloring Book* by lesbian photographer and artist Tee Corinne is equally unique.

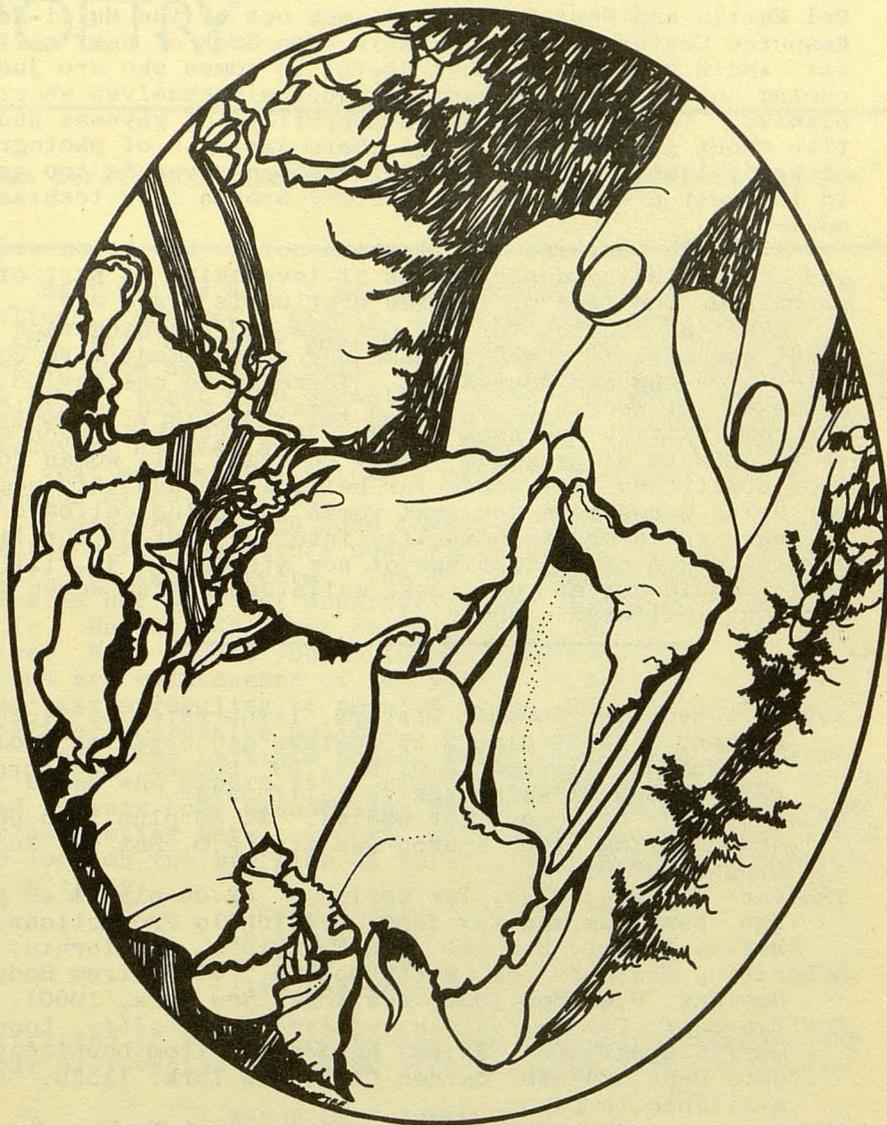
The introduction is by Martha Shelley.

In the beginning we come from the cunt, not from some man's side; and we are washed in the water and blood of birth, not the spear-pierced side of some dying god. In the beginning women made pots and jars shaped like wombs and breasts, and decorated them with triangles, which were symbols of the cunt. So the first art was Cunt Art. The bones of the dead were laid in jars--perhaps to speed the soul to its next womb? Did the ancient women sing, how delicate, sensitive, delicious, how strong the ring of muscle between one life and the next? There are tribal women today who sing praises of their cunts, how pretty and long and full their lips are, how the hair curls and glistens with moisture.

The drawings in this book are of real women's cunts.

"Why did she call it *that*?" a friend of mine wailed when I showed her my copy. I told her I liked using the word "cunt" because it wasn't medical or clinical and because, unlike "muff," "clit," or "box," "cunt" includes all the parts of my genitals. The same thing can be said for "twat," but *The Twat Coloring Book* doesn't have that pleasing alliteration.

I think it is about time we began to create affirming images of our genitals instead of using them for pleasure without ever calling them by name or tasting their juices. Some women relate to their own cunts the way men relate to whores. We have been bombarded with constant messages that the vulva is dirty, smelly, ugly, a symbol of our vulnerability and second-class status. We use our cunt for pleasure and then ignore it. We objectify and become alienated from our own bodies. Self-love does not come easily to women. Leafing through Tee's book, one begins to marvel. The genitals resemble seashells, flowers, exotic landscapes, winged women--without losing their reality as the yoni. A feeling of delight in the female body is released from these pages.



Tee has included different types of cunts so you can probably find one picture that looks like you. Or you can just have fun looking. Seriously, it can be a great relief to discover that your genitals are not unusual or funny-looking. It is also a relief to see proof that we *don't* "all feel alike in the dark."

*Lesbian Love and Liberation*, a pamphlet with text by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, is put out by the Multi-Media Resource Center as part of their "Yes Book of Sex" series. *LL&L* would probably be most useful to women who are just coming out or hets who want to educate themselves about lesbianism. The overall tone is supportive of gayness and positive about gay sexuality, and there are lots of photographs of happy lesbians. But the information given is too general to interest a woman who has already broken into lesbian society.

Although more and more lesbian novels are being written and are including descriptions of lovemaking as part of the narrative, the idea of lesbian erotica is brand new.

Creating erotica for our own use and teaching each other about womansex is a way to make our environment more comfortable, pleasing and nourishing. There is no one way to love a woman. If we can accept this idea and begin to explore its complexities, perhaps we can cease attacking each other. It is a waste of precious energy to trash this woman for promiscuity and that woman for being kinky and this woman for being monogamous and that woman for being celibate. As we begin to integrate sexuality into the rest of our lives, we will discover wellsprings of new strength. We will finally topple one of the oldest walls separating women from our own, inalienable power.

---

*Loving Women*, The Nomadic Sisters, illustrated by Victoria Hammond. \$3.50 plus \$.25 postage and handling from: The Nomadic Sisters, P.O. Box 793, Sonora, California, 95370. Add 6% sales tax in California.

*What Lesbians Do*, copyright Godiva. \$4.50 plus \$.25 postage and handling from: Amazon Reality, P.O. Box 95, Eugene, Oregon, 97401.

*The Cunt Coloring Book*, Tee Corinne. \$2.00 plus \$.40 postage, handling and tax from: Pearlchild Productions, 1800 Market Street, Box 151, San Francisco, California, 94102.

*Liberating Masturbation*, Betty Dodson. \$4.00 from Bodysex Designs, P.O. Box 1933, New York, New York, 10001.

*For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality*, Lonnie Garfield Barbach. \$3.95, hardcover, from Doubleday and Co., Dept. ZA-529, Garden City, New York, 11530. Also available in paper.

*Lesbian Love and Liberation*, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. Multi-Media Bookstore, 1575 Franklin, San Francisco, California, 94109. \$1.95 plus \$.95 postage, handling.

If you would like a copy of the lesbian sexuality questionnaire Pat Califia is circulating in connection with her forthcoming book, please write to her at 1800 Market Street, Box 151, San Francisco, California, 94102. Free!

# POETRY

---

Joan Larkin's *HOUSEWORK*

reviewed by JACQUELINE LAPIDUS\*

---

Half a life ago, I met Joan Larkin in a writing group at college. She was a strong, exciting poet and, apparently, a shy, self-effacing person. I was in awe of her and didn't get to know her very well. It has taken us this long to get in touch, first with ourselves, then with each other, through the women's movement and through poetry, through our self-discovery as lesbians. But we have been richly rewarded for what we now see, not as a wait or a change, but as a process of re-creation.

*Housework*, though Joan Larkin's first published book, is the work of a mature poet who has been practicing her craft for twenty years. The title, deceptively simple, indicates her point of departure: the traditional female role. But it has other connotations. House = where you live. Work = what you do to maintain where you live. These poems are maintenance of the self, the woman, the lesbian feminist struggling to develop fully in spite of a fearful, hostile, oppressive society.

Into Joan Larkin's house, which she shares with piles of books and papers and a growing daughter, friends, lovers and parents come blundering, projecting their own problems or reflecting hers. Brought up to suppress her revolt and to look on the wry side of things, she observes her world with irony:

I move lovers  
in & out  
of this house  
like rented pianos

Attracted to women, she evokes the fear of closeness, the fear of invasion inherited from previous relationships:

Watch out! fresh pain  
is all over this woman  
You want to touch her  
but you're afraid  
some of it will rub off

\*For publishing information on all feminist press books reviewed, see pp. 130-133.

This feeling of vulnerability, turned inside out, becomes a "Monogamous Fantasy," a longing for a relationship the very exclusiveness of which is potentially fatal:

I imagine a future  
with you moody  
smoking & always near me--

& again I try  
behind my back the double knife:

*Mine. Alone.*

Possessiveness and isolation, traditionally attributed to or imposed on women, are inimical to a healthy partnership, but an apparently casual acceptance of lesbian love by "liberal" society, leading to "integration," is not an answer, only a trap:

advancing  
on my belly  
through the mined field  
of your body  
I saw we were surrounded  
citizens children your mother  
watching we were roped off

they were commenting  
I give it a month  
I thought she'd never  
settle down  
is this one jewish  
etc.

Larkin's lesbian feminist consciousness makes her painfully aware of how many layers of cultural barnacles people must scrape away in order to attain the freedom and self-acceptance that makes love of any kind possible. "I think it only fair to warn you," she says to a gay man friend, "the heart is sexless/ It lies undressed in the dark,/ and under the silk/ or the single earring of gold,/ the many-sexed apparel,/ the heart, naked, is beating/ need need need."

One of the most profound discoveries she makes in loving another woman is how deeply that love challenges all one's previous assumptions, brings about a radical upheaval in one's sense of self:

I was not going to say  
how you lay with me  
.....  
nor which of us wept  
to set the dark bed rocking  
nor what you took me for  
nor what I took you for

.....  
nor will I say whose body  
opened, sucked, whispered

like the ocean, unbalancing  
what had seemed a safe position

Love between women is enriched by the recognition of likeness, of shared experience. But we have so few models to emulate, and get so little support, that our vision is still precarious: "An open woman has nothing to anchor her dream: the dream rocks on the window ledge like a bottle/ of children."

In the "True Stories" section, Joan Larkin revisits her childhood depicted as fairy tales gone sour, recalls how grownups condition children, especially girls, to subdue and limit themselves.

.....The neat rule  
of their geometry is to give  
nothing. The beauty of stone.  
I know that I have always been  
alone, and nothing about this  
is different: only that I know it.  
My father's mouth is stone.

Adult women, victims of the same process, survive as best they can. Aunt Betty's defense is to deny her origins: "she's a jew/ like the rest of them but eats/ like a thin richlady". The mother's defense is rejection: "Are these my children? I do not recognize my children,/ such ugly feathers, says my mother the goose."

In the light of these experiences, Joan Larkin feels a special responsibility not to cripple or subdue her own child by compromising with the system, and hates it when she has to:

.....It doesn't  
feel good feeding you  
to the barred playground  
the bloated schoolroom,  
the hard street that scrapes  
you daily whining  
to a sharper blade

The primary relationship, mother/daughter, is natural, secure, fulfilling:

O bean, egg, bunny,  
I loved your red  
head, your just-made lips  
that sucked me satisfied  
when my own body  
was the food you wanted

Larkin reminds us, in "Notes to Kathryn as Myself," of the dangerous results of denial and frustration, both personally and politically:

You refuse speech  
to your anger. Instead  
the sap flows backward in the branches,  
rage turns to bitterness in you--

like the ghettos setting themselves on fire,  
like hurt women turning on themselves,  
turning on one another, refusing  
to spend their anger on a real enemy.

"Is it so hard," she asks, "for us to heal ourselves?"  
And answers: Yes, yes it is hard, but it is necessary. It  
is worth the effort. Our greatest need, and our greatest  
reward, is "a certain notion of strength"-- our own, unlike  
the rigid violence of men, the strength

that is without impact

energy that is still like water  
energy that keeps going like water  
energy that is sustained motion like water

And we can find it, affirms Joan Larkin's final poem, in  
ourselves:

go down to the water and look

go down to the water and look

These poems speak so eloquently for themselves that  
it would be superfluous, I think, to comment on their technical  
brilliance. Joan Larkin is still, more than ever,  
the fine, exciting poet she was half a life ago. What she  
has to say is as vital as her manner of saying it. *House-*  
*work* is as essential as bread, as delightful as grass, as  
controlled as a clenched fist, as liberating as a leap.  
Larkin's poetry shows, with dazzling clarity, how the lesbian  
experience is, or might be, every woman's experience.  
This book deserves to be widely read, and re-read often,  
and given as a gift to those we love.

---

I'd heard Jan Clausen read her poems a few times over the last two years, liked the poems, wanted to read lots of them at leisure, and welcomed the publication of this book. She's organized the poems chronologically by seasons: winter, spring, summer of 1974-75. It seems that somehow women are knowing that the process of our development is crucial and to be charted (one explanation for the rush among feminists to keep journals). I appreciate the opportunity to follow her year, her growth, to root the individual poem in a context larger than itself, to see connections with her life not obscured but illuminated.

The process includes her deepening relationship with Brooklyn, New York, where she moved after growing up in Oregon. I, having grown up in Brooklyn and now living in Oregon, surrounded by back-to-land freaks, especially value the attention she pays to hardcore city existence. The poems are shot through with contrast/tension between her chosen home, "this legendary cold city" with "a sky the color of bruises" and Oregon, "with the clean streets/ the real trees," "green suburbs/smoothly layered/ years." She sees the city with the eyes of discovery, fills the poems with city noises, scenes, images--kids playing outside, garbage on the streets, and always the subway: sometimes the runaway dream-train; sometimes the place where one reads in a newspaper over an irritated fellow passenger's shoulder about women raped and murdered, or notices "women trying to arrest the cinema/that rattles pleasantly enough through passive brains"; sometimes simply the way one gets to work. In "May," she makes her commitment:

i, an immigrant  
no longer blinded by my dreams  
of freedom  
marry this city

there is no way  
to pay the passage back

A no-return journey then: one of becoming "not afraid/you look anglo," of learning that "with your back to the projects/that sky could be anywhere."

These last lines reflect her gift for naming experiences. Non-New Yorkers never seem to understand that you can always, though with effort, connect with open spaces, notice and enjoy them. Similarly, in "February 1, 1975," I recognize the amazement of suddenly knowing I am finished with someone, have given up old love and old anger, have

all the while been disengaging the person at whom I've directed these charged feelings from the feelings themselves:

i had you whole  
a corpse embalmed in anger,  
bones, relics of witch or saint.  
time now to name you changed, unknowable...

She evokes the joy, relief, sense of victory I remember feeling when the war ended at last in Viet Nam:

do you understand  
what it means

how the news transfigures  
even this occupied city:

*they have given their city  
a new name*

*the bars are closed*

I respond ambivalently to "*the bars are closed.*" I know that in bars people are exploited, weakened, pacified; but I also know the importance of gay bars, as places to be with women (nor am I convinced that socialist countries treat lesbians any better than capitalist ones); I know the solace of bars, as places to feel less alone; and sometimes I have fun getting drunk in company. I wonder about revolutionary puritanism. The poem's last line, unintentionally I think, thus suggests to me questions which seem outside the poem, questions the poet has not considered. On the other hand, by letting the two facts speak for themselves, she asks me to imagine a culture changing utterly, where people create their society, name their city like a baby, where bars may no longer serve a useful function for anyone.

Another kind of naming happens in "Office Lunch/A Poem of Solidarity, For Kathryn at Work," as she gives form to one of my favorite fantasies:

what if this were the kind of world  
where midtown crumbled simply  
confronted by solidarity, King Kong as  
our laughter/our boredom/  
our radical disbelief  
in the sanctity of  
government-arranged death  
and corporate espionage

our delicious loves/  
our hairy legs

Delineating the effect of articulating our silent rebellion--the emperor has no clothes on, spoken aloud--she reminds me of the arena we enter in order to survive, also to change, be changed by; of the ways we are and are not of it (in another poem she writes: "the struggle to see myself as separate from/a part of the environment engages all my strength"); how the community and the love we make with each other are fundamentally opposed to the corporate way. She helps me feel both the power of our sly resistance and its insufficiency. And I delight in the image of women with rolling eyes and huge roars ripping apart scaled-down cardboard buildings.

I am interested by the conflict she describes in various ways, between the tedious necessary work of revolution and the apocalyptic desire for all pleasure immediately; most concretely, between a "sense of reality" like that of

...north vietnamese [who]  
build bicycles and cooking pots  
from bomber wrecks...  
coax plant life back  
to cloak the damaged, cratered land

and her

...ancestral memory  
of a place  
where our hungers  
are fearless  
as water  
on water

I don't fully understand the contradiction she posits between what seem to me two essential kinds of vision. I do understand the contradiction she describes in "The Third Day of the Garbage Strike"; yes, there are the daily atrocities which will make history, but

i have been away  
in my lover's body...  
and have not  
been reading the papers

She writes exquisite, specific love poems, like "FDR Drive/Brooklyn Bridge" in which the haunting refrain "kathryn touch me" punctuates scenes of the wintering city until her desire finally bursts into the body of the poem:

kathryn touch me

as alone i fly  
above the untouched river

kathryn touch me

let me touch you/oh

(these seasons we cannot control  
this city stained with distances)

kathryn this poem

i tried so long to write  
without you in it

it is your name

There are poems of awakening lesbian sexuality and of sexual fear. Erotic fantasy/memory flashes in and out of her examination of the world familiarly; we are sexual, political, creative, greedy, frightened, frozen, perceiving animals all at once, not one at a time. But she writes:

climbing into your bed at night i call on you my  
personal solution i am not comforted.

She knows that after touch there remains the fact of "the city folding in on/itself the country the house of cards in flames." "What is needed here," she notes with admirable conciseness: "the courage of a species to evolve." A tall order.

I have not yet said what should by now be apparent: these are brave, thoughtful, energetic, often wonderful poems. Occasionally her obvious enjoyment of sounds calls too much attention to the words themselves, as in the following:

i thought  
if a woman opened and opened  
and could not stop  
what needles, glass slivers, sharp objects  
from the world,  
what turds, hard words  
might not rush in  
to force each vulnerable orifice

The almost inherently comic "turds," rhymed to boot, distances me from the emotional force of the image. Mostly, though, the poems hold me to them. She writes, in "For My First Sister,"

when you walk/among mountains  
don't make the mistake  
of overestimating/the distance  
between us

I don't make that mistake. I feel close to her questions, to the groping authenticity of a voice still discovering its own power, the power at the center of ourselves when we watch carefully inside and outside our bodies, then tell the truth as best we can.

Reading Irena Klepfisz' new book of poetry, *periods of stress*, I keep returning over and over in my mind to Rilke's description in the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* of the number of faces each human being wears in their lifetime-- a description which culminates in his agony seeing a woman, her face held, finally, in the hollow of her hands:

(the woman, startled) pulled away too quickly  
out of herself, too violently, so that her face  
remained in her two hands. I could see it lying  
in them, its hollow form. It cost me indescrib-  
able effort to stay with those hands and not to  
look at what had torn itself out of them.

I think if there is any one theme that threads through Irena Klepfisz' collection of poems, it is precisely this image, the image of a woman stripped to her essential features, looking (as it were) into the shell of her face and the many faces, both her own and others, that appear there.

*periods of stress* is, to me, a book of examination/contemplation/description of the "other," that "other" who can be seen only in relationship to the self--as a person only really understands herself, perceives herself as a separate entity in relationship to the "other." The observer/participant is seen in many guises. The specific persona (aunt, child, lover, old woman) all point to one central face--the individual woman, the poet, always essentially alone, as one is in the act of self-conscious perception, description, creation, in the act of birth, death, in "periods of stress," at the moment of writing the poem.

*periods of stress* is, in every sense, a search. There is an obsession with meaning, with trying to grasp what in fact *is* left when the "face" is torn off. The conclusions range from a profound despair:

the face was a mask  
and i pulled it off  
and there was nothing.

to a recognition of the other as the essential element of hope, of that which nourishes, gives life, and finally, meaning:

last night i dreamt i was  
a gaunt and lifeless tree  
and you climbed into me to nest.  
you were calm so serious  
as you wrapped your legs

around my trunk and pressed  
 your body against me. and  
 wherever your human skin  
 touched my rough bark i  
 sprouted branches till  
 lush with leaves i grew  
 all green and silver frail  
 like tinsel holding you  
 asleep in my wooden arms.

*periods of stress* begins, as it ends, in struggle,  
 human struggle. It begins in war, the Second World War,  
 and ends in Part VI, "Self-Dialogues" on a different battle-  
 field--the interior of a woman.

Born in 1941, in Poland, Klepfisz seems in the first  
 section of the book to be defining for herself the life-  
 experiences that shaped her childhood, in much the same  
 way others of us, born into different circumstances, at-  
 tempt to recreate, hold, understand what gave us birth,  
 what molded our earliest thoughts, feelings, expressions.  
 In her poem, "p o w's," she writes of her father's "return":

my father came home to me for the first time  
 in twenty-nine years just last night in a  
 dream he was old and tired  
 and so scarred so very unlike the image  
 i have of him he pulled his hat down  
 over his eyes ashamed of his years...

he was thirty killed  
 by a german machine gun defending the roof  
 of a brush factory was declared a hero  
 awarded the highest medal a soldier could  
 get awarded posthumously

i am now almost thirty-  
 two should have borne him a grandson to carry  
 his name he came home a bit early

These are not easy poems. They hold no easy solutions.  
 Klepfisz tries to grasp and express the complexity of a world  
 in which things are not sharply defined. Irena Klepfisz'  
 poetry, at its best, is most strikingly characterized by its  
 intense humanity. She consciously avoids the rhetoric of fan-  
 tasy, choosing instead to grapple with the contradictions of  
 reality, those events which move us most profoundly, which  
 shape our lives:

listening to conversations over brandy  
 i am always amazed at their certainty  
 about the past how it could have been  
 different could have been turned around  
 with what ease they transport themselves  
 to another time/place taking the comfort  
 confidence of an after dinner drink

it would be too impolite  
to say my mother hid with me  
for two years among ignorant peasants who  
would have turned us in almost at once had  
they known who we were who would have watched  
with glee while we were carted off even though  
grandad had bounced me on his knees and fed me  
from his own spoon and my mother is a frightened  
woman

The poems continue through years and places--Peekskill,  
Montauk, New York--a journey inside and outside the self.  
But always the focus is on that relationship between the  
self and the world, whether the outside world takes on the  
aspect of a place or another person. And always there is the  
honesty of feeling, even of awkwardness, confusion:

the rooster in the back  
is confused unable to recognize  
the dawn he crows  
at irregular intervals  
and sometimes by chance  
he gets it right

even though the poems themselves are never awkward, never  
confused. Often with a deep sense of irony, with just the  
right touch of humor, Klepfisz moves in and out of her per-  
sona, herself, her lover, until the two become fused (in  
some of the poems) or, in others, irrevocably separated.  
Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the title poem,  
"periods of stress":

it is unwise during periods of stress  
or change to formulate new theories.  
*case in point:* when about to begin  
a new love affair without having ended  
the previous one do not maintain  
that more freedom is required for the full expression  
of individual personality...

try instead: i am tired tired  
of the nearness this small apartment  
of the watering can and level of the window  
shade. I prefer to drift toward more spacious rooms  
towards intimate restaurants and dimly lit unfamiliar  
beds...

As Klepfisz' search for meaning proceeds through the  
consecutive sections of the book it becomes even more de-  
fined, more filled in, as she increasingly focuses on the  
same point from different angles. In "the house," she  
writes:

arranging it is far easier  
than living it. the books  
stand ready on the shelves.

classifications by time or place  
come naturally to me. alone  
finding the book important is difficult...

the world here is fluid  
the beaches undefined. there are rocks  
whose function i do not know.

In the poem which follows, "blending," she continues her preoccupation with meaning, with seeing how the pieces fit --slowly coming to the realization that solitude is, in fact, the key to the puzzle:

in montauk it gets so clear that sky and sea  
become discrete like jigsaw pieces you can pull  
apart and fling yourself through the space  
between. it is a constant temptation for here  
is neither love nor admiration. you get on  
on your own or you don't get on. it's a cold  
world...

The primary contradiction involved in establishing one's identity after all is the fact that one becomes unique at the price of recognizing one's separation from all other things:

the only reason she was not able to make it on her own  
though she'd been on her own and alone most of her life  
was that she'd never before been forced to distinguish  
herself from trees or sand and sea...

There is finally no choice. One has to recognize one's individuality in order to survive. But the line between identity/creative individuality and separation, madness and separation, terror and separation is a thin one:

there had been that moment looking down toward the point  
when the horizon had distinctly separated the ocean and  
sky  
and waves came in regular motions building and collapsing  
in unending fury that she felt herself losing ground  
evaporating.

The conclusion of this poem, "edges," is a stand-off really. The battle is climaxed by anger and a gesture:

she walked for a mile collect-  
ing all the fish skulls she could find and arranged them in  
concentric circles placing a rock in the middle. finally

she carried some large stones to the foot of a bluff hoping to prevent erosion

A metaphor, certainly, for the act of writing the poem itself. The attempt to bring order, to recapture unity, from whatever motive--love, rage, separation, the balance, the extreme. The gesture of defiance, of protest, of affirmation as well as denial.

Another poem on the same theme, one of my favorites, is "they did not build wings for them." Here the isolation, the solitude, is diametrically opposed to the gesture of desperation in "edges." Although perhaps finally the difference is much more subtle than might appear at first glance. In "they did not build wings for them" the action is chosen. In "edges" the woman is acted upon, placed in a position by forces she does not, until the end, recognize. It is a position that is forced upon her, rather than one she chooses, unlike the "unmarried aunt" who

...secretly grafted and crossed varieties  
creating singular fruit of shades and scents  
never thought possible. her experiments rarely  
failed and each spring she waited eagerly to see  
what new forms would hang from the trees.  
here the world was a passionate place and she  
would visit it at night baring her breasts  
to the moon.

*periods of stress* is a book that reaches beneath the surface to ask basic and difficult questions, questions that lie along the edges of all of our lives, as women, as human beings living in a world, all of us, circumscribed continually by war, by struggle--a world that Irena Klepfisz examines with power and precision, in a way that is both moving and immensely human. One could go on and on quoting from her poems. The only way to appreciate them really, to understand any poetry is to read it in its entirety. And *periods of stress* is a book that I have read several times and will certainly read again and again.

# FICTION

*Art and illusion, illusion and art  
This is the song that I'm singing in my  
heart...*

*Art and illusion, illusion and art  
Are you really here or is it only art?  
Am I really here or is it only art?*

*-song by Laurie Anderson \**

---

Bertha Harris' *LOVER*

*reviewed by JULIA WILLIS*

---

Very little and not enough has been said about *LOVER* (lower case l, indicative of more than one, the term in general use), a novel by Bertha Harris, and I suppose there is a reason for this, and that is that women all across and around this land, from somewhere outside of Albuquerque to the distant Poconos, are simultaneously, now envision this, dropping to their knees and/or falling out of Volkswagens, clutching this book to their respective hearts and bosoms, singing hymns of praise and weeping tears of great joy for the angels with a heavenly difference to see, and from each tear - from each beautiful woman who is pure in her spirit - that falls upon the mother earth will spring full something or other a ninefoot Amazon in all her battle array and since this is happening so very much that sooner or later it's going to get in the newspapers when plenty will be said about *LOVER* but by then of course it will be too late, no one has really had a chance to collect her thoughts and inform everybody else of this peculiar phenomenon (except by way of mouth, certainly one of the sweetest ways). And I just thought you would like to know.

This is Bertha Harris's third novel, and it *is* a third novel, it has taken a lot of practice and it may take some getting used to, because we are not simply talking about lesbian history anymore, some folks are doing something about it, and the transcendence of dykelore is the myth, and the myth is the belief and the belief is the reality, and if you understand me then my mother is Amelia Earhart who was never quite the same after her last flight in 1937 when my mother was fifteen and my grandmother was the age of Amelia Earhart only she is Katharine Hepburn who was actually younger but it all works out and time doesn't make any dif-

*\*from Studio International, London, July/August 1976, p. 19.*

ference when my father was an incubator which has long since become obsolete because I am Amelia Earhart too and I am flying through the universe with women I love because we are all who we think we are and who we think we are not and we are all the woman and we are all the lover and Bertha would be the first to admit it, she may well be the first to admit it, in writing.

Let me then be the first to encourage you, in writing, to find yourself in *LOVER*, and I hope that I can do this without quoting more than one part of the whole out of context, although I will remind you that just because everything is the same does not mean there are fewer stories, on the contrary there are more stories than there ever were before: "The story of Veronica goes: inspired by a suffering face, she held a cloth to it; and on the cloth was left an image of the face she had wiped. No one knows for sure, however. Some imagine her to be that woman who had 'an issue of blood'. Others point out that the English word 'vernicle' means *true image*." And it is just as true that art does indeed imitate life as it is just and true that life can and will come to imitate art - within every woman who creates and thus within every woman who *is* there is the brain machine which sits on the dining room table and tells the truth and the lover who runs through the streets telling the truth as it happens, and Bertha Harris as a woman who creates tells and is telling, sitting and running, the truth in colors that move and flow and merge and dissolve and become the white light that is ourselves, all of them, and one day we will thank her for it. I am thanking her now, but then I always was and will be.

---

---

Rita Mae Brown's *IN HER DAY*

*reviewed by* DEBORAH CORE

---

Rita Mae Brown's new novel is about revolutionary young lesbian feminists and closeted middle-aged lesbians. Mostly, the book is about what the two can learn from each other. Carole Hanratty, a professor of art history, and Ilse James, Vassar graduate and waitress at New York's Mother Courage restaurant, become lovers at the beginning of the book and break up at the end. In between, they make love, argue about politics, and show each other another side of the lesbian experience.

The political attitudes of the book will probably generate controversy among lesbian feminist readers. The narrator maintains some distance from the beliefs of both women by revealing almost every point through dialogue or internal monologue. Therefore, neither Carole's happy capitalism nor Ilse's revolutionary fervor is condemned. Some readers might wish for a clearer political heroine, but I think the narrator tries specifically not to provide such a moral center. Instead, "her day" is the day of both women, because both have a place in the feminist world.

The narrator is less successful, though, in other areas. The novel depends on dialogue; when the dialogue is weak or the narrator must take over, serious stylistic flaws occur. Too often the narrator tells us things that should be left for us to infer from the action. For example, we learn that after Carole's sister's death, her brother Luke "...took a typical male retreat and drank alarming quantities of whiskey." The commentary is unnecessary and therefore weakening. The same sort of thing occurs, more intrusively, near the end of the book when Ilse and her group confront the men at the *Village Rag*. Instead of letting the men be made real by their actions, the narrator resorts to sarcasm, calling Martin Twanger "the intrepid reporter." The novel would be more convincing if the narrator were more consistent.

There are a few other stylistic problems. Some scenes are gratuitous, such as the one in which Ilse is accosted by an exhibitionist. The scene functions solely to provide an occasion for the feminist put-down, "That looks like a penis, only smaller." The book is also marred by several spelling mistakes and a curious disregard for commas.

Comparisons will inevitably arise between *In Her Day* and *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Rita Mae Brown's first novel. Most readers will find the earlier novel the more successful of the two, because it is funnier, clearer, and sharper in its political purpose. But *In Her Day* is, though flawed, a rather brave book, and it will be interesting to see what Rita Mae Brown does next.

---

# THEORY

---

Adrienne Rich's OF WOMAN BORN: MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE  
AND INSTITUTION (W.W. Norton, 318 pp., \$8.95)

reviewed by JOAN LARKIN

---

I had not imagined that a book about motherhood would be a broad theoretical feminist work of far-reaching significance--but that is what *Of Woman Born* is. That the connotations of motherhood for me before I read *Of Woman Born* were still largely of "private" experience, and of interest principally to those who had experienced biological motherhood, helps to say how important this book will be in transforming our vision of our lives and demonstrating the interconnectedness of experiences heretofore seen as having no connection. "Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to think of the home as a private place." In fact, "private" strands *are* woven through all of this book: memories, conversations, excerpts from journals--deeply felt personal experience that gives integrity and resonance to the prose, supplying the tones usually missing from a "scientific" work. (That dualistic thinking--which splits "inner" and "outer," body and mind, irrational and rational, poetic and scientific--is inadequate to describe our actual perceptions of reality, is one of many points Rich develops through the book.)

Rich evokes the *institution* of motherhood--distinct from biological motherhood--as an institution created by and serving the patriarchy and, "because we have all had mothers, (affecting) all women, and--though differently--all men." She demonstrates that *both* childbearing and childlessness are used by the patriarchy to define women negatively. In writing the book, she found that she was "thrown back on terms like 'unchilded,' 'childless,' or 'child-free'; we have no familiar, ready-made name for a woman who defines herself, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is self-identified, who has chosen herself." Whatever our choices, whatever the limitations on our freedom to choose, all women will find support in this book. One of the things I appreciate most about it is its inclusion and integration of both homosexual and heterosexual experience, not as opposites, but as points on the continuum of women's sexuality (she writes--in a passage critical, from the viewpoint of one inhabiting a woman's body, of Freud's division of things into what is "inside me" or "outside

me"--of the sense "in love-making which is not simply 'fucking'...of *interpenetration*, of feeling the melting of the walls of flesh...blurring the boundary between body and body." And in the next sentence: "the identification with another woman's orgasm as if it were one's own is one of the most intense interpersonal experiences...")

Rich develops a vision of the institution of motherhood--of the patriarchy that depends upon it and the ways all women are limited by it--through a series of chapters on many of its aspects, researched with thoroughness, and incisively analyzed; she is at home in a surprising number of areas. She writes of the power stolen and withheld from us in the name of this institution--through laws and penalties, art, psycho-analysis, the medical establishment and all establishments of male "experts": "The absence of respect for women's lives is written into the heart of male theological doctrine, into the structure of the patriarchal family, and into the very language of patriarchal ethics."

One of the chapters most exciting to me discusses the Great Mother in her early forms (Ishtar, Astarte, Demeter) and the gradual devaluation of the Mother Goddess paralleled by the increasing reduction and rejection of the human woman. While emphasizing the "need to be critically aware of the limitations of our sources" (she discusses and evaluates the search for traditions of female power in the work of Bachofen, Briffault, Elizabeth Gould Davis, Helen Diner, and others), she posits "the idea of a prehistoric period, when not a handful, but most women were using their capacities to the utmost," and when "the mother relation and status were far more important than the wife-status." She evokes the images, "beautiful in ways we have almost forgotten," of the prepatriarchal goddess-cults, in which the female was primary and which "told women that power, awesomeness, and centrality were theirs by nature, not by privilege or miracle." She differentiates power *over others* from the *transforming* power symbolized by the sacred vessel--pottery-making, invented by women, being one form of woman's experience as "a creative being possessed of indispensable powers." (She emphasizes that "in primordial terms the vessel is anything but a 'passive' receptacle: it is *transformative*--i.e., active, powerful.") And she shows how patriarchal thinking, expressing deep unconscious fears of woman, has rendered aspects of female experience--the menstrual cycle, for example--sinister or loathsome.

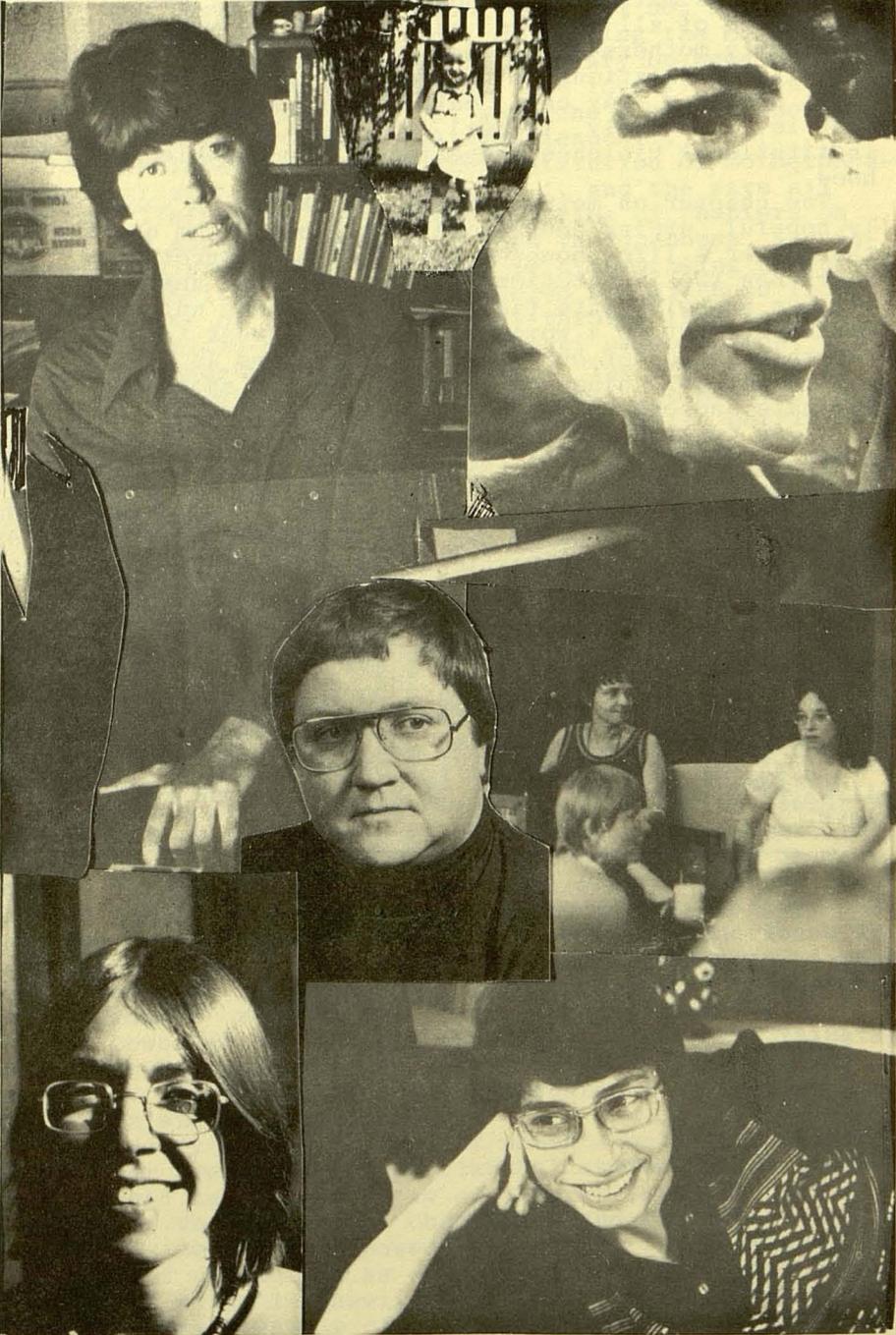
The history of the control of woman's potential relationship to her powers by the patriarchal system "which has been so universal as to seem a law of nature" is documented in chapters on the history of obstetrics and its transformation into a province of male power; the use by the patriarchy of the labor of childbirth as support for the idea that woman's passive suffering is inevitable--"the purpose of her existence"; the relationship of mother and son, including explorations of the mockery leveled at the Jewish-American mother, of the misreading of the survival-strength of the so-

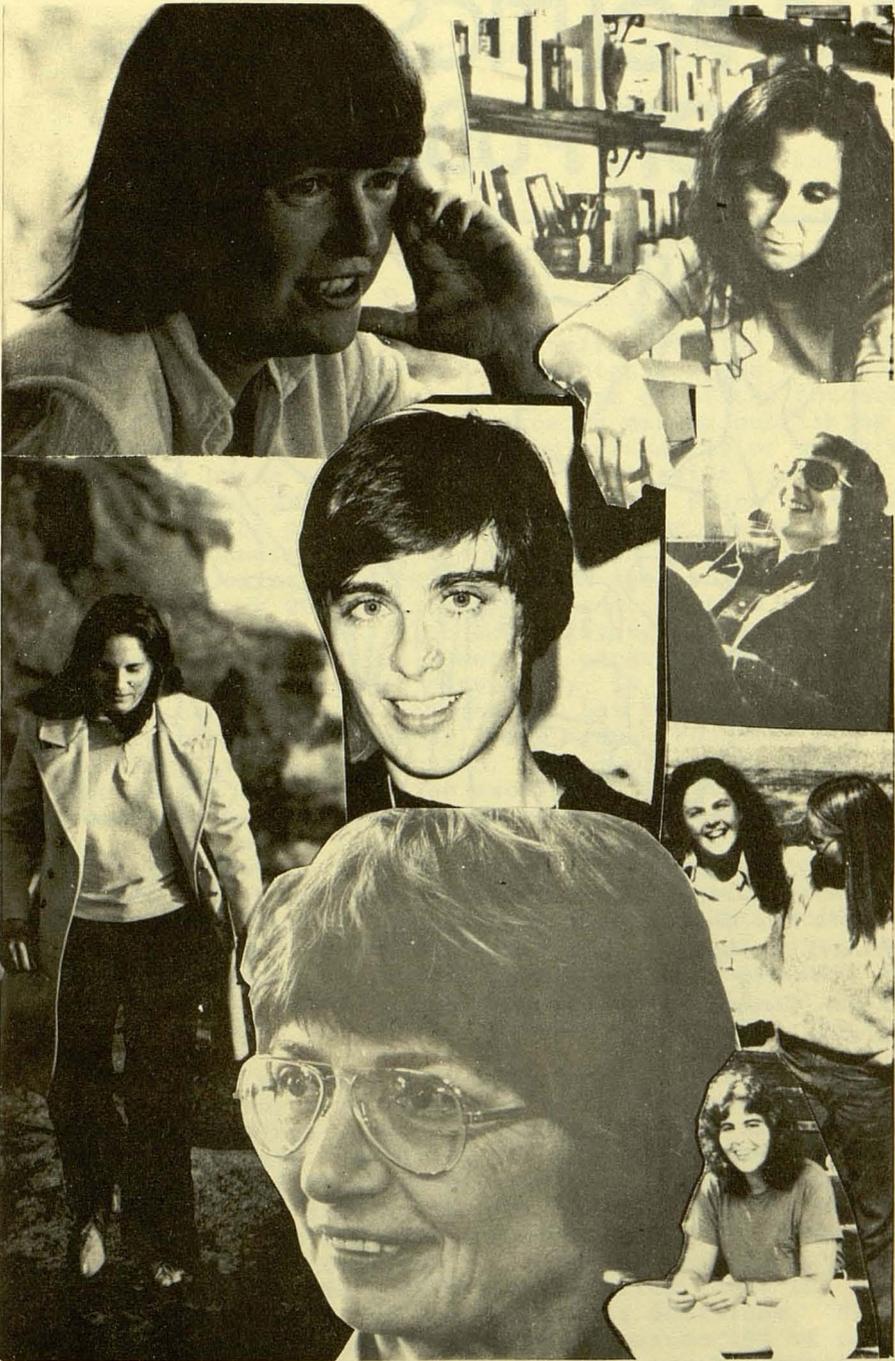
called black matriarch as power, of the sentimentalization and hatred of all mothers; and of "the pressure on all women --not only mothers-- to remain in a 'giving,' assenting, maternalistic relationship to men." In discussing birth control, abortion, day care, child battering, infanticide (the list is, incredibly, longer), she reveals "the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood."

The chapter on motherhood and daughterhood seems especially hopeful, urging courageous mothering: "The quality of the mother's life--however embattled and unprotected," rather than the institutionalized sacrificial absorption of all our energies into taking care of others which men have demanded, must be a woman's "primary bequest to her daughter." And this holds for our other relationships as well: "The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities."

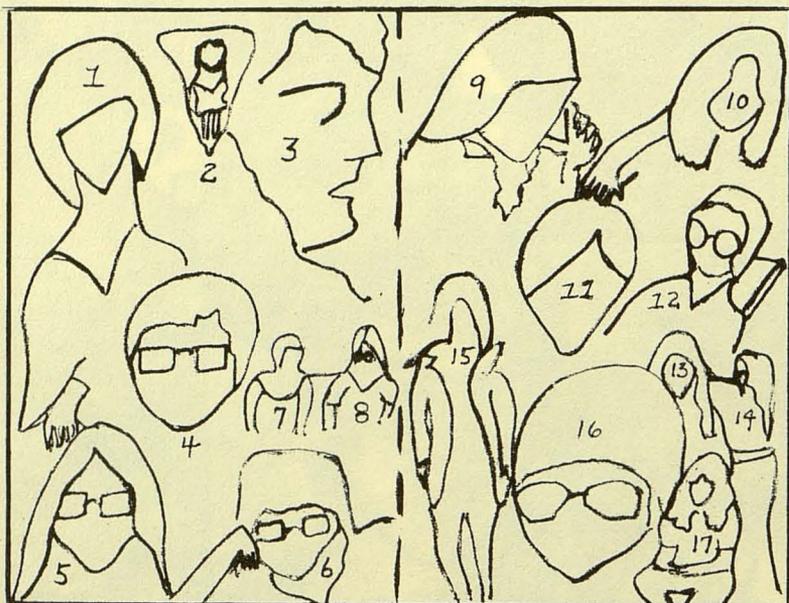
It is frustrating to attempt to summarize in so brief a space the concepts of this book, on nearly every page of which I have underscored whole paragraphs. It will take time and many re-readings to assimilate *Of Woman Born*. But already its effect on me has been like that of a series of consciousness-raising sessions, in which it is not so much the startling originality of statement (though there is much that is newly said here) but the accretion of many concrete details and stories, the demonstration of their inter-relatedness, and the refusal to cut feelings away from the intellectual process, that have burned into my consciousness a vision of things as they really are, stripped of patriarchal sentimentalization, convention, and lie. *Of Woman Born* has transformed my way of seeing my life and the lives of others, and I want to give it to all the women I love.

---





# THE POLITICS OF PUBLISHING



1. Sandy Boucher
2. Bertha Harris
3. Rita Mae Brown
4. Julia Penelope  
Stanley
5. Jan Clausen
6. Bonnie Zimmerman

7. Adrienne Rich
8. Bererly Tanenhaus
9. Susan Griffin
10. Deena Metzger
11. Joan Larkin
12. Beth Hodges

13. Judith McDaniel
14. and friend
15. Susan Sherman
16. June Arnold
17. Melanie Kaye

"We as lesbian writers are influenced by each other's opinions, art, politics. This interaction has its positive and negative aspects, but at the very least we have to recognize that we're stuck with each other."

--Jan Clausen

## THE POLITICS OF PUBLISHING AND THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

by Jan Clausen

*I will not die in your city. I will not be buried  
under your streets. I will not dress myself in  
your houses of gold and lies and grotesque forms.*

--Susan Sherman, "The Fourth Wall"

In June, 1976, I sent a questionnaire entitled "Publishing as a Political Act" to over 35 lesbian writers, editors and publishers. It consisted of nine questions touching on political issues lesbians face in making publishing decisions--issues important to me personally or which were currently being discussed within the lesbian community. In an accompanying letter I explained my plans to write an article on the politics of publishing: by making use of the questionnaire responses I hoped to represent a wide variety of existing perspectives on the subject.

I got back 20 questionnaires, some of them filled out in great detail, many with accompanying letters or answers running over onto extra sheets of paper. Reading them has been very helpful to me personally; in the classic tradition of consciousness-raising, it has made me aware of the extent to which my seemingly individual concerns and perplexities are in fact shared. Later on I'll discuss the results and offer selected excerpts. First, however, it seems necessary to explain the circumstances, both private and public, which impelled me to write such an article.

I'd prefer to pretend to myself and to you that I'm dealing with these issues from a position of objectivity. But finally I cannot escape my awareness that writing such an article is itself a political act. And it seems to me that by feigning neutrality I risk writing something which is dishonest, bland to the point of inutility, or both. Therefore, what follows is avowedly subjective, one voice among many.

My basic assumption is that a writer's decisions about how to make her work available to an audience are in some measure political decisions--whether or not she acknowledges the fact. For it is not only the content of art but its context which determines its value and impact. Apparently this assumption was shared by a great majority of the women who answered the questionnaire, though ideas about how to proceed from there varied considerably.

For a long time I have been thinking about the political implications of my own publishing decisions. At one time I submitted (unsuccessfully) a manuscript of poems to a variety of publication contests and establishment publishers; subsequently I decided, for a combination of

political and practical reasons, to abandon that first manuscript and work cooperatively with other lesbians to publish later work through Out & Out Books. That decision constituted a commitment to distributing a book to women at bookstores where they buy and at prices they can afford; it gave me a concrete sense of feminist alternatives to establishment publishing. But it was only a beginning; clearly I would continue to face difficult decisions about where to publish future work. Writing this article is in part an attempt to deal with some of my own conflicts on the subject.

In addition to my private concerns, several controversies involving publishing decisions arose within the lesbian community. One of these centered around the proposed publication of a second lesbian issue of *Margins*, the review of little magazines and small press books.

The first lesbian *Margins*, guest-edited by Beth Hodges and appearing in August, 1975, served as an unprecedented, highly valuable collection of critical articles about lesbian literature and publishing. It sold well, becoming the first issue of *Margins* ever to be reprinted. Tom Montag, the regular editor, requested Beth Hodges to do a sequel issue. Plans for this were underway when several women who had participated in a Modern Language Association panel on lesbians and literature stated their feeling that the transcript of that discussion should not appear in *Margins*, as had been proposed, but in a feminist publication. Shouldn't the feminist press be receiving the profit and prestige from the *Margins* material? After much debate, Beth Hodges made a search for a feminist publisher, ultimately reaching an agreement with Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson of *Sinister Wisdom*.

I reacted with dismay. It had not occurred to me to see anything "politically incorrect" in a lesbian *Margins*. Beth Hodges had complete editorial control; the magazine, which cost a dollar and was well distributed, was readily available to women. (And it was later reported that *Margins* made little or no profit from the lesbian issue.) As an author with a book to be reviewed, and a reviewer contributing an article, the fact that *Margins* is read by people who don't usually read lesbian/feminist publications, including librarians, was important to me.

I bore no ill will toward *Sinister Wisdom*; I knew nothing about it. But it seemed clear that a brand-new magazine couldn't hope to provide distribution similar to *Margins* and would almost certainly cost more. What most disturbed me about the *Margins* controversy, however, was not its immediate practical consequences but the fact that a publishing decision affecting a large number of women had been made on the basis of what appeared to be a minority's political convictions.

The second incident which raised important political issues did not involve me directly. This was the arrangement made by Gina Covina and Laurel Galana, editors of *The Lesbian Reader* (Amazon Press), to have Harper & Row publish

a second edition of the *Reader*. Factors involved in the ultimate failure of that arrangement were writers' demand for control over their work (the signing over of copyrights to Harper & Row would have prevented authors from reprinting their own work without payment of permissions fees), writers' demand for more money for their work, and eventually a conflict between the editors and Harper & Row over the issue of payment for copying the original edition. Questions were raised about the responsibility of editors to authors, and about what kind of compensation we are entitled to expect from the commercial press. The demand of one author for \$1,150 above the \$40 that contributing authors were promised challenged the legitimacy of publishers' traditional profits.

The third incident which propelled me toward the writing of this article was the May, 1976 New York City Lesbian Conference's panel-discussion/workshop on lesbian publishing. On the panel were June Arnold and Parke Bowman of Daughters, Inc., Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin of Out & Out Books, Fran Winant of Violet Press, and Bertha Harris. What many in the audience hoped would be a discussion of practical aspects of publishing and self-publishing quickly turned into an acrimonious debate over the validity of publishing with "the man." While painting what seemed to me an overly rosy picture of feminist publishing alternatives, June Arnold, Parke Bowman, and Bertha Harris took such a strong stand against publishing with the male-controlled presses under any circumstances that some who disagreed with various points they made (myself included) felt reluctant to speak up.

In the aftermath of this experience, however, I felt increasingly that the solution to such conflicts must lie in the direction of more discussion, not less. And I had urgent political concerns which I wanted to share. I decided to write an article about the politics of publishing, an article I hoped would contribute to a public discussion involving as many lesbian writers, editors and publishers as possible.

I want to clarify the fact that my own political concerns--like those of a number of women who answered the questionnaire--are not confined to those issues which affect either only lesbians or only women. The emphasis on lesbian-feminism in the questionnaire is due to the fact that the writers with whom I interact are for the most part lesbian-feminists, and that I am writing for a primarily lesbian audience.

Several women objected to my references to "the lesbian community" and "the lesbian writing community." Julia Stanley pointed out that "a 'community' is a group of individuals banded together for 'common cause,' and most of the lesbians who live in the U.S. are not members of any *community*." Susan Griffin mentioned that the word "community" has sometimes been used as a "sort of club to back up one's opinion." I agree heartily that lesbians

are not a cohesive social group, nor do we share a common political philosophy. If we were, if we did, this article would be unnecessary. What I meant to imply by using these phrases is that we as lesbians and especially as lesbian writers are aware of each other--influenced by each other's opinions, art, politics. This interaction has its positive and negative aspects, but at the very least we have to recognize that we're stuck with each other.

My thanks go to Fran Winant for pointing out the significance of using phrases like "major press" and "major commercial press." This, she says, simply perpetuates the view that "their" presses are "major" and ours are "minor." I've tried to correct that error by henceforth simply referring to "commercial presses." And apparently the distinction I made between feminist and lesbian presses was largely irrelevant (partly because the respondents, with the one exception, were not lesbian separatists, partly because a large percentage of the women's presses are run by lesbians). So from now on I'll just speak of "women's presses."

What follows is my analysis of the response to each question, including questionnaire excerpts which are either representative or striking in some way.

*Question #1: How would you feel about publishing a book you wrote or edited with each of the following: a major commercial press; a university press; a small press which is controlled entirely or in part by men; a feminist press; a lesbian press. Please discuss the reasons for your preferences.*

Several women said they would prefer commercial publication. The majority mentioned their awareness of the importance of the women's presses to us, a desire to support them, and a feeling that feminist publishers would have the greatest understanding of and concern for their work. But they also indicated that practical considerations had led them or might lead them to choose other alternatives at least for some of their work. These considerations included money, the desire for better distribution (which they felt would mean reaching more women), the need for "credentials" and, in several cases, the fact that they might be unable to find women's presses willing to publish their work (especially if they wrote novels or prose non-fiction).

Interestingly, several women who are very much involved with women's publishing indicated that they couldn't fault women for choosing non-feminist publishing options because, as writers, they themselves are acutely aware of the hardships and limitations of small press publishing.

Though several women had published or wished to publish with a university press, most felt that this alternative had neither practical nor political advantages. The male-controlled small presses seemed to be the least attractive option; Sandy Boucher's comment that "individual men would be making decisions affecting my material, probably

from a viewpoint of little comprehension of it or downright hostility to it," was typical.

Except for one woman who specified that her response not be quoted unless the article appeared in a publication with "for sale to women only" printed on the cover, no one categorically ruled out options outside the women's presses.

"I want to tell you that I prefer publishing with a lesbian-feminist press (and I am) and that lesbians should publish with women's presses, but my experiences as editor of *13th Moon* can't permit me to affirm such romanticism for other women. I'm beginning to feel that unless you are rich and/or you have no other outlets there is a certain masochism in these choices."

--Ellen Marie Bissert

"I think I would consider the other types of presses only if I had approached the feminist and lesbian or lesbian-feminist presses and they had rejected my book. But I must say that though I have been writing for a long time I have never yet been in a position where there was real money to be made from what I write. Still, here is my reason for wanting to be published by women. I write for women; last year's publication of my book of stories came about because of the support of women and the initiative of a women's press. I was able to work with these women during the printing and publishing process, and to have some control over content and form. They did not rip me off. Now all of us split the proceeds (small as they are) from the book. In other words, this publishing process was integrated into my life and my politics..."

--Sandy Boucher

"My preferences would be a lesbian press, a feminist press but that preference would be superseded by desire to see my work published. Thus, I feel at this time women/lesbian writers should use any of the above if they can manage without having work butchered."

--Maureen Brady

"I believe that in fact those who are critical of Feminist writers publishing with trade houses must face the consequences of their criticism: that the only women who can write without support are the wealthy and those who are not responsible for the care of children. And if those are the only women who can devote full time to writing the content of Feminist writing will not reflect the lives of *most* women...Yet the fact that I choose to publish two books with a trade house does not change my feeling about Feminist and lesbian presses...There is no way, ironically, I could write the book I am writing without their existence, because these presses have made possible the creation of a woman's literature, and it is in the wake of the reverberations of our culture, inside this culture, that I write...What I am doing, and intend to

continue doing, is to support the Feminist and lesbian presses in any way I can, including a commitment to publish future books with Feminist presses, and at the same time, to seek out and accept every possible source of support that I can find which will allow me to continue writing as a Feminist."

--Susan Griffin

"I write for every human being who can feel the touch of my words, and out of every diverse and particular part of my self. For different reasons, and being aware of the assets and liabilities of each, I would publish with any of the above save the University Press...I guess my preference would be a black lesbian press (which I notice you don't include). And of course the absence is instructive; we'd all like to be in perfect harmony with our publisher, but barring that, I choose by the nature of my material, who and how many I hope to reach, and last but not least how much shit I have to put up with to get my work over..."

--Audre Lorde

"I would prefer the lesbian or feminist press because my material would be more respectfully treated by women than by men, in general. However, if I got decent treatment plus adequate compensation I would not be averse to publishing with commercial presses."

--Martha Shelley

"The power to grant validation and status is, I believe, the greatest power that the establishment has over writers. They make you a 'real' writer, not just self-published or a 'small press person.' They give you credentials which have meaning and value on a job resume. They validate you in the eyes of your sisters--not only women who have never heard of small presses but women who know perfectly well that small presses exist and the struggles we are going through...Movement feminist 'critics' base their concepts of good writing on the kind of women's writing that is being published by the establishment...as long as that power of validation exists, I don't think a writer can be condemned for publishing with the establishment."

--Fran Winant

"My first preference, though it is not without conflict, is to publish with a major commercial press (with a contract giving me control over jacket design, advertising, etc.). Reason: to me I write primarily to communicate, to as many women as possible, straight and gay, feminist and nonfeminist, and the major presses vastly surpass the others in reaching power..."

--Irene Yarrow

*Question #2: Would the content of the book in question influence your decision about where to publish? In what way?*

Here a number of women indicated their sensitivity to the way in which content would influence a *publisher's* choice, thus limiting the writer's options (e.g. commercial presses publish very little poetry, male-controlled presses are hostile to overt political content, feminist presses aren't equipped to publish certain types of scholarly writing). But it seemed clear that content would have some influence on most women's decisions. Several mentioned that they would not publish anything critical of the women's movement in the male-controlled press.

"Yes. The more outrageous the book in feminist terms the less likely the establishment press would publish it unless they could see money in it, despite their personal preferences. I see my political writing going to the feminist press while, in time, my fiction will go to establishment presses."

--Rita Mae Brown

"Yes. At this stage in the Women's Movement there are some books which all women should have access to. In 1975 it would have been terribly wrong, I think, not to have taken advantage of Knopf's distribution to get *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook* places any woman could see it. If my book were important--in the way *TNWSS* is--I would look for a major commercial press. I wonder too whether the lesbian presses should publish everything...If they are busy publishing what others would be willing to publish...there's lesbian work that is *not* being published."

--Beth Hodges

"The content of the book would affect my decision less than the quality of printing and of care on the part of the press. Bonnie Carpenter at Effie's Press, for example, does extraordinarily loving, careful and beautiful designing and printing. But 'content,' if one can call it that, did have some influence on my desire to publish the new sequence with Effie's Press; I wanted these poems to appear from a woman-controlled press first, although they will eventually form part of the next book I publish with Norton."

--Adrienne Rich

"If I felt this was just another of my many creations, I would be a lot less careful than if I thought this was my life's work, and contained most of what I had to say to the world. If this was my life's work I would be reluctant to offer it to anyone but lesbian/feminists, because I would want to be sure it was not advertised or used in an exploitative way, or just buried, and I would want to be sure I would not lose whatever rights I felt entitled to concerning my work. I also might be nervous about the book going out of print--but there are problems with this in both the establishment and small press scene..."

--Fran Winant

Question #3: *In your view, what impact does the existence of a variety of publishing options for lesbians have on the strength of lesbian presses?*

Again, many respondents emphasized the *lack* of options for most women; we publish where we can. Several suggested that commercial publishing by lesbians might strengthen the women's presses by creating a market for lesbian writing. Most, however, recognized an existing or potential conflict between the needs of the women's presses for support and their own personal needs as writers. There was a feeling that women could and should continue to support women's presses even if they chose to publish elsewhere--by contributing money, publicizing the women's presses, and continuing to publish some work with them.

"Lesbians who successfully publish lesbian work with the man are weakening the small press women's movement."  
--Ellen Marie Bissert

"I doubt that other options at this time compromise the strength of lesbian presses. I read the books published by lesbian presses but I need more reading material than they supply. Also I don't like the idea of seeing lesbian publishers attempt to compete with major publishers in the sense that high volume sales become a goal (existing in conflict with espoused politics of our movement). A lesbian press should exist as a sample of woman culture--anti-patriarchy, i.e. important differences should be apparent in relationships of 1) publisher to writer, 2) publisher and writer to reader, 3) writer to publisher and 4) reader to publisher. (Greater accountability!)"  
--Maureen Brady

"The more open lesbians who get published regardless of the press, the better for lesbians and the lesbian press. If one feminist-lesbian author 'breaks through' into establishment publishing the publicity will help sell lesbian press books. The more money the lesbian presses make the more authors they can publish."  
--Rita Mae Brown

"I am not sure that lesbians who are at all militant *have* that many options in terms of book publishing--although they may have more options in terms of mags. The 'variety of publishing options,' *only* for well-published women, acts as a drain on the lesbian writing community, and creates competition and jealousy. It encourages lesbians to censor themselves in order to get grants and major press publication, and as Fran Winant once pointed out, makes women's presses feel that they have to have a slicker product."  
--Alison Colbert

"I think the strength of lesbian presses has first of all to do with the strength of lesbian writing, and with the strength of the diffusion-network being created by the feminist community. I think lesbians, like all women, should feel free to use all the options at our disposal. I have been able to call attention to lesbian- and feminist-press books in places where small-press books were not yet available, where I had been invited to read because my books were available. I see this as a halfway house, however, a situation that will be changing as more and more women's bookstores and communications proliferate. At present, we need all the options possible."

--Adrienne Rich

"If you mean options in the commercial press, it all depends on what you are writing. Lots of material won't get in the commercial presses, not because lesbians wrote it but because it is too radical. So it depends on whether you can please the boys or not. The majority of lesbians and radicals don't have access to the major publishers, so we need the lesbian presses, independently of whether or not the boys will publish one or two lesbians. In other words, we don't all have options about which press to publish with--we just hope someone will, or we do it ourselves."

--Martha Shelley

*Question #4: Some writers who begin by publishing with small presses subsequently have the opportunity for major press publication. How do you feel about lesbian writers doing this?*

Several respondents felt clearly positive about this; most felt ambivalent--aware of the dangers of opportunism, but also sympathetic to the factors which might make such a choice desirable or necessary. A recurrent theme was that choices have to be made according to each individual's situation and needs, and cannot be judged categorically.

"a) On one hand, I feel the way I do when a friend gets a grant from a State Arts Council--jealous. b) If I like the woman's poetry/prose, I'm glad that it will be acknowledged and consequently distributed well (most of the time, it doesn't, actually, get good distribution). c) If a lesbian writer chooses to publish with a commercial press, I support her decision, though it may not be my own. People have access to different things at different times. Lesbian writers will come to an understanding of their own needs and convictions only by following through with what they feel is best at the time."

--Robin Becker

"I, as a small press women's publisher, don't like it. But realistically as a sister writer, I can't blame them and wish I could do the same."

--Ellen Marie Bissert

"I think it's a good idea--certainly for economy and distribution. But I don't see it as a progression--beginning and advancing, etc. There are some books that belong, by their nature, to different types of presses..."

--Audre Lorde

"Hard--I like to see writers able to live as a result of their work--also feel a well-known writer can help make a small press successful--trade-offs have to be weighed individually."

--Judith McDaniel

"I think we should seize whatever opportunities are available to us. If a door opens to one of us, I think she should walk on through it! Looking backward, lesbians face an existential void of thousands of years. If we should fail now to make ourselves heard, we will fail future generations of lesbians who will wonder where we were, just as we wonder about our foremothers..."

--Julia Stanley

Question #5: *Do you feel that a lesbian's decision about where to publish her work is a private matter, or does she have a responsibility to a larger community?*

The obvious problem with this question is that "responsibility" and "community" can be taken to mean a lot of different things. Respondents tended to emphasize responsibility, while rejecting authoritarian imposition of rules of conduct--pointing out that in the end the individual must make her own choice.

"Responsibility is a complicated thing. I feel responsible to a number of communities, individuals, ideas, traditions. My sense of myself does not derive from a SINGLE SOURCE, but from MANY SOURCES. There are so many contradictions inherent in all our lives, so very many, that I want to support quality work by gay women in many capacities..."

--Robin Becker

"A private matter--but that word private carries connotations of separateness, disconnectedness and lack of responsibility to others which I don't mean to condone and which many people react against and in reaction swing toward the idea of a group decision-making process. Of course any decision involves many people and many possibilities, but while these should all be considered, an author's decision about where to publish her work must in the end be a matter of individual responsibility or else the author has abandoned her self."

--Gina Covina

"If the entire community stands to benefit in the long run by individuals' refusing certain options, then the community should be able to explain exactly how the program works so that the *individual* makes the decision to conform, for everyone's good. (And probably the community will have to figure out how to share money so that writers can survive--without making the man rich in the process.)"  
--Beth Hodges

"Very definitely responsible to her community--which doesn't mean she will always only publish within that community, but is accountable for her decision to those peers who are supporting her in her work."  
--Judith McDaniel

"I think it's a moral matter that must be dealt with in terms of each writer's morality. The larger community for me includes everybody, and so that's where I participate as much as I can."  
--Jane Rule

"We have only begun to build our 'larger community.' And because we have only started, responsibility and truthfulness are of primary importance. Somehow, we have to forge our individual concerns so that they do not impede or intrude upon the larger community...it would be unfair to myself to *pretend* that my private concerns don't exist if they happen to be 'out of step' with current dogma in the lesbian community. However out-of-step I may be, I still have to deal with myself as honestly and responsibly as I can, and I really can't let the opinions of other lesbians stop me from being who and what I am--this is a hard lesson I am just beginning to come to grips with. I feel a tremendous responsibility to our community, and I think I am most responsible when I am completely honest about my feelings."  
--Julia Stanley

"The responsibility is mutual between the community and the writers...In general, lesbian writers are not being sought out by their community as was the case in the early days of the movement. Some lesbians can hope to get a 'name' by being published by a large or well-organized lesbian press that has the money to publicize them. The 1-2 presses in this position can't publish everyone. Women lucky enough to be published by these presses will get an equivalent VALIDATION to what they would receive from the establishment presses. So they get a really good deal: moral 'purity' and the validation-in-advance-from-some-higher-authority that their lesbian-feminist community seems to demand/need before it can truly take an interest in their work."  
--Fran Winant

Question #6: *What is the responsibility of the editor of a lesbian anthology to the authors represented? To the lesbian community?*

In asking this question I wanted to get at the fact that slightly different issues are involved in publishing another's work than in publishing one's own; the editor has to respect political viewpoints which she may not precisely share. Responses put a premium on honesty and decency on the part of editors, especially in setting and communicating the terms of publication, rather than on a specific political stance. Beyond that, mention was made of the need for artistic integrity and inclusion of work which is fairly representative of lesbians, not exploitative or gratuitously negative. Alison Colbert mentioned the necessity for including more work by Third World and working class lesbians. The question of money for editors is a delicate one; Melanie Kaye says, for example, that editors should not make money off other people's work, while Susan Griffin points out the need for an editor to seek some support for her labor.

"If you're talking about money, perhaps then not to hoard it is the responsibility of the editor. With most anthologies however that's not much of a problem. For example, with *No More Masks!*, our advance didn't nearly cover our own costs of xeroxing, postage, etc. And so far our royalties haven't equalled permissions, so we're still in the red after three years of vigorous sales!"

--Ellen Bass

"Re: *The Lesbian Reader* I felt these responsibilities to the authors:

--To be honest and as clear as possible about our relationship, the details of publication, the finances involved.

--To make that information available to all the authors promptly, and any other information any of them wanted about the book.

--To make a cohesive whole from all their parts, an end product visually beautiful, well-designed and pleasing to everyone.

--To try to arrange for the widest-reaching communication possible for the book and the most possible money for the authors."

--Gina Covina

"To authors--if she decides to use their piece, to maintain the articles' perspective if any editing is necessary--to be clear about money, copyrights, who is publishing, printing, etc.--if this isn't decided when call for articles goes out, that ought to be made clear too and what possibilities she will accept or reject.

To community--mainly accountable for quality and politics of articles--good writing--no gratuitously negative or destructive pieces--criticism/self-criticism *can* be a constructive concept."

--Judith McDaniel

"The editor's responsibility is to make sure the authors retain copyright over their own work, to make sure they are paid adequately and that information is not withheld from them concerning the financing, distribution, etc. of the book. Toward the community, her responsibility is to present a book which can be used as a tool for our liberation. I'm not trying to sound utilitarian in the strict and puritan sense--a book which makes you think, which makes you laugh, share sorrow--anything except a book which lies about us."

--Martha Shelley

Question #7: *Do you feel that the lesbian writing community should act in any way to encourage or discourage certain publishing decisions on the part of its members?*

This turned out to be the most emotionally charged of all the questions. Many respondents expressed vehement opposition to any such "encouragement or discouragement." Julia Stanley's, "No. I believe that coercion is wrong, no matter who engages in it!" was typical. Some were incredulous that I'd even suggested the possibility--which surprised me, given that such actions, of both encouraging and discouraging varieties, have been taken by individuals and groups within the community in the recent past. Some women did, however, suggest non-coercive methods of encouragement.

Question #7 takes on added relevance in light of this statement by June Arnold in her recent article "Feminist Presses and Feminist Politics" (*Quest*, Vol. III #1): "It is time to stop giving *any* favorable attention to the books or journals put out by the finishing [Commercial] press...It is time to understand what male status really means and withdraw support from any woman who is still trying to make her name by selling out our movement." (June Arnold--like Judy Grahn of the Women's Press Collective and Coletta Reid of Diana Press, whom she credits, among others, with providing help and criticism in the preparation of her article--did not return a questionnaire sent to her.)

"No. I think, however, that where to publish should continue to be a topic of concern and discussion, but that the community shouldn't take a hard line and expect lesbians to follow it. That's too simplistic and there are too many other factors. I want to relate a personal instance here. When my book, *I'm Not Your Laughing Daughter*, was reviewed in *Amazon Quarterly*, I was reprimanded for publishing with a University Press and having a book come out that cost \$7.00. Aside from the fact that in paperback the book was \$3.50, I felt I was lucky to get published anywhere. I felt...that I might never get a chance to publish again, that I'd better take the first chance I got and could later, when I was in a position of somewhat

more power, be choosier...Until then the idea of publishing a book seemed like a dream. It could happen to other people but not me. The editors of *Amazon Quarterly* in their review of me seemed to assume that the power was mine or that I should have assumed it was mine at a time when I didn't believe it was mine and the only way I knew to get it was to say yes for a while. Now, I have that power and feel I can choose, and so I do choose. But no one can legislate that for anyone else."

--Ellen Bass

"I feel that people ought to be encouraged to investigate the possibilities of publishing with lesbian-feminist presses, that people who have done so ought to talk about the advantages of doing this...I agree with June Arnold in her saying that the boyspick you up and drop you at will, and when they decide in a few years that neither feminism nor lesbianism is fashionable anymore, they can drop all the dykes, and that's it. Whereas if we publish with the lesbian-feminist presses, and those presses grow and proliferate, there will be no way we can be dropped or silenced."

--Sandy Boucher

"What are the stories, the textures, the sources of emotion behind this question? I am indeed part of a political group now which has called a boycott of the male left publication *Mother Jones*. We are asking that feminists withhold writing from them until they meet our demands (which include that they give us an issue to edit, that they hire two feminist editors, that they begin to pay their female staff overtime pay). So, yes. But I am also concerned about trashing in the movement. How much this takes away from us. How I see it as a kind of projected self-hatred, a woman-hating. And how tired I am of it. How suspicious I am now of any but the most thoughtful, careful criticism."

--Susan Griffin

"Some thoughts about being a member of the lesbian writing community: I appreciate the opportunity afforded by this form to express my thoughts, because I am a lesbian who writes. Living in the northwest I am mostly isolated from this community as, I am sure, are many women who write. Before women who are better known as writers (who are mostly clustered around the east coast and S.F.) lay down codes of conduct, some attempt to forge lesbian writers into a communicating community should be happening, so that community decisions can be representative and careful..."

--Melanie Kaye

"I don't understand this question. It sounds like censorship and I know you must be talking about something

else. Please particularize or clarify. (I disagree, let's kill her?)"

--Audre Lorde

Question #8: *Do you identify strongly with a political movement other than lesbian-feminism? How does this influence your publishing decisions?*

About half answered a simple "no" to this question, several mentioning that they did not identify with lesbian-feminism as a political movement either. Several mentioned socialism, or a concern with a variety of issues involving oppressed groups which have not been organized into a movement with which they can identify.

"Yes, socialism. It doesn't influence my publishing decisions any more or less than feminism. Neither movement economically has created options for me or any other artist or salesclerk or anyone. Until economic options exist all the rumpus is hot air."

--Rita Mae Brown

"I suppose I am a socialist, but am not really a member of any political group *per se*. I have a deep commitment to exposing the contradictions of corporate control in this society, and the effects of corporate co-optation (such as by major publishing houses) on 'liberation' movements such as feminism...A related public issue of tremendous concern to me is the creation of hierarchies among women writers, and lesbian writers in particular, because of inequalities in publishing history...I wish consciousness of such contradictions were higher in the feminist (and lesbian-feminist) community than it is, but unfortunately it's not."

--Alison Colbert

"Yes, though I can't name the movement: I'm strongly anti-capitalist, support struggles of third world people, working people, etc., and hope eventually for a coalition of all oppressed peoples against our oppressors (how not to sound like a goddam leaflet?). Thus, ultimately I'm not a separatist, though at this point in time I think of my community as women--that's who I want to reach. I feel politically closer to women who are socialist-feminist (I mean really feminist) than to lesbians into separatism *as a goal*, who see straight women as the "other" and all men as the enemy, and who don't think in terms of economics, i.e. capitalism. This would influence my publishing, at this point, in that I want to reach many women, not only lesbians and not even only feminists..."

--Melanie Kaye

Question #9: *Please feel free to discuss any issues important to you which haven't been raised in this questionnaire.*

Responses to this question included the following:

"Polarization is the sign of a weak mind. Once you think establishment presses vs. feminist presses you already blew it. The point is to be imaginative. To try and find ways to use the establishment press for the benefit of feminist presses and to try and help the feminist presses become more professional. As it now stands feminist presses are generally run on the whim of the owner. If they don't like you, no deal. That's no way to run a business or a revolution."

--Rita Mae Brown

"The main clarification that has happened for me as I worked on this form is that my first priority is not the survival and strengthening of the lesbian presses. I don't think alternative institutions will revolutionize society, though they can help, and especially can help support those of us trying to make changes; and I count the lesbian presses among these alternative institutions. I would like to see more discussion of how we can use art in service of social change...and less of how to build women's or lesbian enclaves..."

--Melanie Kaye

"We--and by we I mean any group of two or more like-minded individuals of whom I happen to be one--we must beware of the fatal tendency to strangle anyone who chooses to expand our definitions of ourselves, beyond ourselves.

What is a lesbian?

a lesbian/feminist?

the lesbian writing community?

the lesbian press? is it black white poor rich

middle class working class scholarly academic

anti-intellectual funky racist or demure? Does

it brush before bedtime?"

--Audre Lorde

"There are assumptions in this questionnaire that trouble me--that political responsibility and loyalty to a group are one in the same thing, for instance; that there is a distinction between private and public morality...Also I think the moral issues are more difficult for me when it comes to magazine rather than book publication since a book, even attached to a large commercial house, has a more independent life than a story or article in a magazine whose other material and advertising may be offensive...No publisher has ever 'controlled' a book of mine except by refusing it, and the 'profits' have always been marginal enough so that I could even politically rationalize that I'm, in a small way, helping to pull the poor old giants down. I've never involved myself in the promotional process, give very few interviews, reserve myself as much as I can for my own work so that I can grow like a tree to whatever height and age is measured for me."

--Jane Rule

"If all lesbians put work time and energy back into our community in some way I think we would have to worry a lot less about what the establishment was doing, or who was being published where. I think what worries the community is that the community itself gives so much credence and authority to establishment-published women or any other women who come to us highly-publicized and pre-packaged, even through movement channels. The community has always had the ability to validate its own writers and support its own presses. The early lesbian movement started to do this, then the tide turned...The women who have tolerated this situation should be questioning the *community's* responsibility and not the responsibility of the individual writer."

--Fran Winant

"I *think* I felt a bias in your questions--I felt I 'should' feel lesbian writers should support lesbian presses. Didn't think this ideal for getting real answers."

--Irene Yarrow

Having attempted to present a comprehensive picture of the questionnaire results, I want to recapitulate the issues which seem most important to me. First, I am profoundly uneasy about the implications of choosing to publish commercially. I mistrust the publishing establishment for more reasons than simply that it is male-controlled and male-identified, largely indifferent to or contemptuous or exploitative of women's work. Commercial publishers are capitalist corporations, tied into an inherently destructive economic system. I cannot claim to oppose that system while ignoring the way my own actions are shaped by and in turn feed into it.

Unless and until the economic basis of the publishing industry changes, its motives and methods will remain contradictory to the interests of serious writers. The publishing industry does not exist for the sake of books--not even for books which fit neatly into the patriarchal literary tradition. It treats books like commodities, sells them through mass-media promotional campaigns, turns authors into celebrities, shapes public taste to suit its purposes and then claims it is merely giving the people what they want. For every one of the books important to us which it distributes, others are suppressed--rejected in the first place, or neglected and left to go out of print once published. Commercial presses publish an infinitesimal amount of poetry, regarding what they do publish as an act of charity--because poetry doesn't "sell." A recent *Village Voice* article intimated that commercial publishers could make publishing poetry more profitable if they chose to do so. But why should they, when they can make much larger profits on mass market paperbacks? Stories of good experiences with the commercial presses do exist, but they're the exceptions.

At the same time, I believe we have to recognize that this form of publishing is with us to stay. For one thing, the option to publish with a women's press is no more automatic for most women than is the option to publish commercially. The existing women's presses are simply not equipped to publish all lesbians' writing; to a large degree they tend to publish work by their friends or writers already known to them. If you've written a novel which is rejected by the Women's Press Collective and Daughters, Inc., you're out of luck; the situation with poetry is not much better. Thus, a great deal of women's publishing is a do-it-yourself operation. Self-publishing is a draining, demanding occupation, and not all women have the resources, skills and time which it requires.

Then there is the question of money. Daughters is, as far as I know, the only women's press (except possibly the Feminist Press, which publishes a different type of material) capable of paying writers at a scale comparable to or above that of the commercial presses. Most other women's presses struggle to break even, with perhaps enough money ahead to reprint or to publish a new title. In addition to paying (often inadequately), commercial publication may open up the possibility of jobs, reviewing assignments, etc. which are especially important to women who lack academic credentials. Finally, there's no doubt that though the attention the commercial press pays us is arbitrary and superficial, the distribution it affords has been important in some cases. The results of the questionnaire made it clear to me that a number of lesbians are going to continue to choose commercial publication; I believe that any attempt to pressure them into doing otherwise, or to read them out of the movement for incorrect behavior, will only prove divisive and, ultimately, ineffective.

But we do have the possibility of taking certain kinds of collective action--not against each other, but against the establishment presses. The strategy employed by feminists who organized a boycott of *Mother Jones* (discussed above by Susan Griffin) might again be used against establishment targets. And we should be looking for ways to actively support future labor actions against publishers such as the strike at Macmillan several years back.

What about the alternatives to commercial publishing? I'll deal first with the least attractive. The university presses are appropriate for some kinds of scholarly material, and they do print poetry. They exist in a kind of limbo half in and half out of the establishment, offering prestige but little in the way of either money or distribution. Then there is the male-dominated small press movement. While in general it is as oppressive to women, as condescending, as uninterested in our lives and visions as the commercial presses, at least it serves to undermine the hegemony of those presses. And without the network of small press directories, print centers, distribution mecha-

nisms, etc. which it has generated, the women's presses would not exist in their present form. For this reason I, unlike many who answered the questionnaire, feel some small degree of affection for the male-controlled small presses. And I continue to publish a few poems in male-edited literary magazines.

The women's presses are simply indispensable to us. Most of the work they publish would otherwise never be seen. In large part they are responsible for the amazing vitality and variety of contemporary women's writing. At the same time, they can in some measure serve as a testing-ground for our vision of what truly feminist publishing--publishing on our terms--ought to be. (The substance of that vision depends to a large extent, of course, on one's political perspective. One indication of a failure of vision and practice is, I believe, the fact that women's publishing has not adequately reflected the experiences and needs of women from other than white, middle-class backgrounds. As Audre Lorde points out, there are no black lesbian presses. But this is intimately connected to a pervasive problem within the women's movement.)

The suggestion was made in several questionnaire responses that the women's presses ought to represent a true economic alternative to the commercial presses. Perhaps we could create more presses which, like Daughters, are able to make more than token payments to writers. But it is unlikely that most would-be publishers would have ready access to the capital necessary to do this. And an important theoretical issue is involved, that of the extent to which "feminist businesses" can represent an authentic alternative for women. In the long run, I don't believe they can. The laws of profit which govern their functioning are the same as those governing other businesses. Any "counterculture," ours included, exists in reluctant symbiosis with the dominant culture. Until the dominant culture is destroyed or transformed, the subculture survives marginally, precariously, on sufferance.

This, paradoxically, is why the women's presses cannot be our final goal, our ultimate solution--and why they are absolutely necessary to us. We have written nothing that can't be forgotten, ploughed under, as the efforts and insights of nineteenth century feminists were ploughed under. In the end, only our own will and effort will keep our words alive. Therefore we (and that includes lesbians who read books as well as those who write them) must continue to support our presses--by publishing with them when we can, by contributing money when we can, by buying books--and by endeavoring to develop a feminist criticism which validates women's experience, recognizing good writing (and by "good" I do not refer to an aesthetic standard divorced from our political values) no matter where it is published.

This brings up a related point, the fact that packaging communicates its own message. A book published by the commercial press transmits the message, "The commercial press thinks that writing by this woman is important," while a book published by women says, "Women have important things to say to each other and they are willing and able to make books to do it." The latter message validates us. I think this factor ought to be weighed along with the rest in making publishing decisions--particularly, perhaps, in the case of an anthology.

I am concerned about the way in which the process of getting published, getting recognized, conducting a "career" emphasizes individual accomplishment rather than helping us to remember the collective sources of our creativity. Doris Lessing once said (in "Doris Lessing at Stony Brook," interview with Jonah Raskin reprinted in *A Small Personal Voice*, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., 1974, p. 68), "...when I start writing, the first thing I ask is, 'Who is thinking the same thought? Where are the other people who are like me?' I don't believe anymore that I have a thought. There is a thought around." I would like to take this view of my work, at the same time accepting my need for a certain measure of personal recognition. The existence of a publishing establishment, with its emphasis on competition and its influence on our notions of success, exacerbates the difficulty of doing so--for me and, I suspect, many others. Again, the women's presses can facilitate a process of self-validation, if we choose to use them for that purpose.

We are right to be wary of the consequences of personal power; we have to admit that individual accomplishment on the part of any woman does not further the cause of other women if it serves to separate her from them. But we must be careful how we judge each other. As I read the questionnaire responses, I had a feeling that many of them had been written by women looking nervously over their shoulders, afraid almost to write down their opinions. Several women wrote of their concern with trashing. Several others told me they felt apprehensive about how their published comments would be received. Clearly, an unhealthy atmosphere has arisen--one in which women are afraid to voice their thoughts.

Susan Griffin suggests above that trashing is a "kind of projected self-hatred." I see it as tied up with our own personal guilt, a guilt proportional to the problems we face. Unable to arrive at solutions, we blame ourselves and/or each other. I hope this article will contribute to a general recognition that, though each woman's publishing decisions are her own responsibility, the dilemmas themselves are not private but built into the system under which we live. That system seeks to pit us against each other; it forces us to do things we don't want to do in order to survive.

That far-flung, heterogeneous grouping I have designated "lesbian writing community" for lack of a better term is never going to agree on a single political philosophy, strategy or code of conduct. Nevertheless, it is important for us to talk about where we're headed, because the general tendency of what we do together is going to be more important than the actions of single individuals. For many of us, the women's presses have literally made possible our art, our movement, our lives. They represent a sort of vast collective accomplishment on the part of large numbers of women who have never shared a unified political vision.

I intend to continue working and publishing with small presses, for the most part women's presses. Like most of the women who responded to the questionnaire, however, I will not absolutely rule out other publishing options. I know that there is no way to live in America without participating in capitalism on some level, or for that matter to live in the world and remain aloof from patriarchal values and institutions. We live in occupied territory. I am determined not to lose sight of that reality, no matter what opportunities may become available to me or to other individual women.

*I want to thank Ellen Bass, Robin Becker, Ellen Marie Bissert, Sandy Boucher, Maureen Brady, Rita Mae Brown, Alison Colbert, Gina Covina, Susan Griffin, Beth Hodges, Melanie Kaye, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel, Adrienne Rich, Jane Rule, Martha Shelley, Julia Stanley, Fran Winant and Irene Yarrow for returning questionnaire responses and Elly Bulkin for providing support and criticism. By sharing their ideas with me, they made this article possible.*

---

## THE NAIAD PRESS

An interview by Gene Damon (Barbara Grier) of *The Ladder* with ANYDA MARCHANT and MURIEL CRAWFORD, founders of The Naiad Press. The interview takes place in Anyda and Muriel's home in Pompano Beach, Florida.

- G: Since, until this time, virtually nothing has been known about The Naiad Press, will you please tell us something of your backgrounds and earlier life?
- A: I think I may speak for both of us. I am a lawyer, with a good many years of service in private practice and in the U.S. government and international organizations. Muriel has likewise spent her working life in the legal field. We have the same general ethnic and cultural background--English-Scotch-French ancestry long settled in the southeastern United States. We have neither of us been married. We have both earned our livings since our teens. We are of the generation that was overtaken by the great depression of the 1930's when we were first going out into the world on our own. We have both had ample experience of the problems, the frustrations, the put-downs that women are subject to in the male-dominated business and professional world. We are both feminists. I can remember, as a young child, the last episodes of the votes-for-women struggle right after the first world war, watching the suffragettes being bundled into police wagons for picketing the White House. I was a very junior assistant to Alice Paul in the early attempt of the 1930's to get the Equal Rights Amendment adopted. Now, fifty years later, I am still plugging for ERA and am active in the current phases of the women's movement.
- G: In what way does this lead you to the present publishing venture?
- A: In the first place, we are both now retired and able to give our time and energy to some activity concerned with opening up opportunities for women. We have noticed that, though there are a good many women's presses coming into existence, none of them are doing just what we would like to do. We both have always been inveterate novel-readers, with definite ideas about what a novel should be. We are also, as I am sure many other women are, dissatisfied with what is available in published work by lesbian authors

G: Do you see The Naiad Press as very different from, say, Diana Press, Daughters, Inc. and The Women's Press Collective, and if so, in what ways?

A: I find it difficult to describe The Naiad Press in comparison with the other women's presses, since I am not sure that I clearly understand their several viewpoints. It is easier to say what The Naiad Press is striving to do. In the first place, The Naiad Press is dedicated to the work of lesbian writers. As anyone knows who has examined the two editions of your bibliography, *The Lesbian in Literature*, lesbian novels have until recently fallen into three or four categories: tragedies depicting the hopeless quality of lesbian love amongst women more than half-convinced of the truth of the epithets leveled against them; caricatures of non-women and menaces to society; lesbians as objects of ridicule; and, down at the bottom, straight pornography for the titillation of male appetites. The exceptional novel that is veracious in its portraiture and of good quality as a novel is even now very rare. We are convinced that this scarcity is due at least in part to the obstacles in the way of publication.

Otherwise, The Naiad Press can be described as a small press, operating on a shoestring, brought into being, like most other small presses, in protest against the strangling effect of the market conditions that dominate the large commercial presses.

G: What do you see in the future for feminist publishing? For The Naiad Press?

A: Let's take the future of feminist publishing first. All I can say is that I hope such publishing ventures continue to exist, that they will not be put out of business by economic pressure and the apathy that comes from lack of support. Women's presses speak for women. They give an outlet for the voices of women that would not otherwise be heard. At the stage of development now reached by the women's movement, they are essential. And as we see lesbians as the quintessential feminists, we feel that a lesbian press has an especially important reason for existing.

As for The Naiad Press, its future depends on the acceptance of its books by the readers for whom they are published. At present the Press is not self-supporting. The authors it publishes must be content with the satisfaction of seeing their books in print and available to readers. Already it is apparent to us that there are many women who find pleasure in the books we have published. If our readership grows, the future of the Press will be assured.

G: How do you feel about propaganda and art?

A: There is at present a tendency, which I consider unfortunate, to require all feminist publications to be propaganda devices for the women's rights movement. This exclusivist view is one I deplore. Women artists must be free to practice their gifts as they see fit. An artist's spirit cannot be harnessed arbitrarily for the purpose of propaganda, even in a good cause.

The Naiad Press operates on the assumption that there is an art of the novel. And please remember that in the last two hundred years of the novel in English women have been the great innovators. Novel writing has been the one form of art in which women have successfully circumvented the determined efforts of the male Establishment to suppress the very idea of women as artists. Novelists can, of course, have great influence on their readers. But any argument projected in a novel should be there by implication. The novel should never be merely a vehicle for the argument. Otherwise we return to the days of the moral tale.

G: The work of Sarah Aldridge gives rise to criticism that it is "elitist" and "apolitical." Do you find this incompatible with your own personal socialist leanings?

A: No. I have always been a socialist--never a Marxist, since I have never been able to accept determinism. I have always been very much opposed to any social, economic or religious dogma that seeks to shackle the human spirit. I am opposed to chattel-slavery, sexual slavery, economic slavery of every kind. And I don't find anything in Sarah Aldridge's novels that offends my feelings. I believe this sort of criticism is irrelevant. As we see them at The Naiad Press, Sarah Aldridge's novels portray women of a certain background, living in a certain set of circumstances. The fact that in doing this she projects a society in which there are a great many injustices does not mean that she advocates the preservation of those injustices.

In fact, Sarah Aldridge's novels do seem to have a purpose beyond the entertainment of the reader. That purpose is simply to portray women who love other women as normal, valuable human beings. Her characters refute the stereotypes of lesbians as abnormal, perverse, guilt-ridden aberrations in the body of human society. Every woman who has experienced love for another woman (and I mean erotic love, not affection) knows these stereotypes to be false, mere caricatures and labels. How better to show this than by portraying ordinary women living ordinary lives in easily recognizable circumstances?

G: What has The Naiad Press published so far?

A: The Naiad Press has so far published four novels, three by Sarah Aldridge: *The Latecomer* is the love story of

two dissimilar women who meet by accident; *Tottie* is the story of two young women involved in the violent unrest among young people in the 1960's; *Cytherea's Breath* is the story of the love of two women active in the women's rights movement in Baltimore at the beginning of the twentieth century. The fourth novel, Robin Jordan's *Speak Out, My Heart*, is the first published work of a young writer whose concerns are those of young American lesbians who now have the choice, if they have the courage, to emerge as what they are and what they see themselves to be.

Our fall, 1976, titles are the first English translation of Renee Vivien's novel *A Woman Appeared to Me* and, of course, Gene, your own *Lesbiana*, a collection of book reviews (1966-72) from *The Ladder*.

G: What future projects are underway at this time?

A: The Naiad Press's future projects are, for money reasons, still tentative. But it is hoped that within the next year we shall be able to announce the publication of two novels, one by Jeannette Foster and the other by Valerie Taylor. In doing so, we are seeking to make available to current readers the work of two of the most popular contributors to *The Ladder*. Also, in the future The Naiad Press hopes to publish a biography. The life of one colorful lesbian is under consideration.

G: The Naiad Press differs greatly from the other feminist presses springing up in one area, that is, the Press does not physically create its own materials in all cases. Do you feel that this is in any sense important to the future of the Press?

A: It is true that The Naiad Press pays to have its books produced by commercial printers. As far as The Naiad Press is concerned, the printing process is a means to an end--the production of books. In itself it has no political nor ideological significance. In the case of Robin Jordan's novel, *Womanpress* of Chicago produced the book. In the future, where possible, the resources of women book manufacturers will be used.

G: What is the relationship of The Naiad Press with *The Ladder*?

A: In publication, the manufacture of books is only half of the problem. There must be some means of bringing the books to the attention and into the hands of readers. The Naiad Press has been fortunate enough to gain the interest and cooperation of *The Ladder* in helping to distribute its publications. We hope to continue this cooperation to our mutual advantage.

# WOMEN'S PRESS COLLECTIVE

an interview by Harriet with MARTHA SHELLEY of The Women's Press Collective, September 5, 1976, Women in Print Conference, Omaha, Nebraska

- H: You've been with the press collective for two years, but it was started six years ago, in 1970. Could you tell something about the origin of the press?
- M: It started off as a mimeograph machine in somebody's basement. Some women got the idea of publishing a book of poems and drawings by women because there wasn't anything around like it. They produced the graphics on onion skin, which stuck to the mimeograph drum so they had to lift each sheet off by hand. After many hours and lots of spaghetti and coffee they managed to produce this rather thick book called *Woman to Woman*, staple it together and start taking it around in shopping bags to sell. The day after it appeared on the streets, Glide Memorial Church called the women over and said we'd like to give this book nationwide distribution but there's one thing wrong: these passages from the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* are too extreme, too offensive, too whatever. Well, of course, the women got incensed about Glide's wanting to delete material. They said no, so the guy asked, what are your plans for the book? They hadn't had any plans, they'd just produced the book, but they started dreaming up plans and said oh, well, we'd like to produce more books, and we'd like to get a printing press, and they went on creating plans all of a sudden, and what happened was they walked out with a check for \$500 to buy a press--knowing nothing, of course, about presses! They took the grant and bought this huge old klunker of a German press--they just wanted the biggest press they could find. It was broken, they couldn't get parts for it, they didn't know how to fix it, and the only guy in town who could fix it said sure he'd do it if one of the women would sleep with him, so they threw him out and called up every woman in town who knew anything about mechanics, electricity or printing. They struggled for two years with that press and produced only one book, but they learned a lot about presses. Then they managed to get rid of it and get hold of a Multilith 1250, and most of the books--we've produced 20--that you've seen from the press collective were produced on that. Fairly recently, we've acquired a bigger press and a lot of equipment, but for years the only equipment at our disposal was the 1250. What kept the press going, however, was not equipment but thousands of hours of woman labor--hand collating, hand stapling, women caring enough to put in hours and hours of time with no pay in order to get the word out. To a large extent we still rely on that kind of caring--either in the form of voluntary labor or donations--women believ-

ing in the writing and also in the graphics. We've put a lot of emphasis on graphics.

H: Could you talk about the framework of the press collective?

M: We started off being a collective because that was the thing to be, but we ended up as a collection because everyone's got different political points-of-view. We're not trying to reach a consensus where everyone thinks alike. We now have five working members, but it's varied over the years. It began with eleven and at one point there were thirteen, but it doesn't take that many to make the place go.

H: If there is political diversity, what is the framework you share?

M: The framework we share is that we're all committed to feminism--whatever that means these days--that we're all lesbians, although originally there were two straight women in the collective, and that's about it. None of us is committed to getting rich.

H: Are you committed to supporting yourselves off the press? Is that a priority?

M: We're committed to supporting ourselves somehow; if we can do it from the press, great, and we're working toward that, but the primary commitment is to getting out the word because if the primary commitment were to anything else I think the work would suffer. We're trying to get out new images of women both verbally and visually and any other way we can--musically, too. We work with Olivia Records: Judy Grahn and Pat Parker are doing a record for Olivia, and we printed the cover for one of their records, "High Risk." So what we are trying to produce is new images of women--images of strength, images of rebellion. We're trying to encourage women to see ourselves in different ways. And that can go pretty far, like the new book by Alice Mulloy, *In Other Words*. It's about all sorts of things in the realm of perception: the way the brain works and different layers of language within our own language, and relationships--could be lesbian relationships, could be any relationships--how all these things are connected. It's making a lot of scientific material accessible for the first time to ordinary women. We're trying to put out a whole lot of information that we feel is useful to women.

H: Do you define yourselves as a lesbian press?

M: No, we don't because, although we're all working together as lesbians, we put out books that aren't written by lesbians--for instance, *The Rape Journal* and *Sing a Battle Song* by women of the Weather underground. And we don't

want to reach just lesbians. We don't want to have this exclusive club that's defined by whom you sleep with. We're more interested in defining politically what we're doing and how we're acting. We're fighting against the patriarchy, we're also fighting against capitalism, we see a battle going on many fronts.

---

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

—beth hodes

*Friday, October 1, 1976:* I try to explain to her how dull I was before 1974.

"She" is my landlady, aged sixty or so, a widow, a mother. She may not be a native of the town, but to me, who's more foreign than any, her life is indistinguishable from that of the usual German-Russian Catholic citizen of Hays, Kansas.

Today she is standing in the yard when I come home from the college. We talk together. "You're writing, aren't you?" I am startled. How does *she* know what is preoccupying me?! Two minutes earlier and a half a block away, I was crossing the street, thinking that I had a commitment to write for *Sinister Wisdom* and wondering how soon I could abandon this "career" as editor.

Now this woman asks, a propos of nothing, "You're writing, aren't you?" I tell her that yes, in fact, I have a fast-approaching deadline. I tell her more, that I have been free-lance editing for a couple of years and generally what my projects are. She says something about talent. I try to explain that in the old world I had no talent. I tell her I was asleep until women became visible to me.

How do I write this piece? If I'd written a week ago, I would have begun, "I understand how women become paralyzed." I didn't tell my landlady the other side. But I want to tell you the truth, the whole story - or rather, my whole story. While I praise the movement to her, saying that now I have a passion and passion makes me able--the truth is, now I find myself *disable*.

Crossing the street, I was wondering how soon I could abandon the editing career. That's not accurate. I was wondering how long I could last. Before that moment, it had not been clear to me that I couldn't last. I'd been saying that I was ready for another career - but I didn't mean it. Then, as I was crossing the street, a conversation from last week came back. I was in a restaurant in NYC with three of my good friends. I was telling them that I'd had it, that I couldn't be the mediator forever, that I couldn't take the pressure of explaining everyone to everyone, of getting each one published where she wanted to be published, of being "correct" politically. (I feel other pressures, but this is what I was saying then.) And even while I was telling them I couldn't take it, one of my friends was ask-

ing that I say where I would publish each of the eight articles they had an interest in. She was right. And today I got the message: I can't last--I answer to too many. It was all inevitable; the moment I said yes to *Sinister Wisdom*, everything would follow. This story is not about me even; in this story, the star is the politics of publishing.

*Saturday, October 2, 1976:* I'm experiencing a great deal of anxiety in writing this. Except that Harriet and Catherine asked me to, I would not write it. I don't find it interesting. But I think my resistance to writing has another explanation: I don't like being vulnerable.

\* \* \*

The first time I edited, everything was so simple. My range of choices was limited in the extreme. I just did what I could within the narrow bounds I had. There were no politics. *Margins* discovered me via the not-me-but-I-know-someone-who-knows-someone route. I didn't have a choice of publications; my choice was to say yes or no to *Margins*. When I accepted the editing I had met exactly two of the women who were the final contributors to the issue. So for seven months, I asked every woman I could meet or could reach by mail, "Will you write?" When the time came to assemble the issue, I used every article I could--that is, I could in good conscience. The issue appeared and it was praised universally. (Well, three or four women said they didn't much like the issue, but no one trashed me for doing it.)

This time nothing is simple. When I decided to do the issue with *Sinister Wisdom* rather than with *Margins*, I already displeased half the world. For some, the essential is not the biological sex of the publisher, but how available the publication will be to women (its distribution and its cost); they regretted my decision. Whereas last time I ran out of articles before I ran out of space, this time I have three times the number of articles and a format which offers a fourth less space. How do I answer to the other three-fourths of my contributors? When I did the *Margins* issue I was the editor; Tom's function was to carry out my directives. But *Sinister Wisdom* is Catherine and Harriet's spanking-new baby. When we are three amazons who love literature and the issue is the criticism of literature and the issue is only their second...impossible that we not be working together. This time I'm not the autonomous editor. I can't help but be responsive to Harriet and Catherine and the decisions about what goes in the issue are finally decisions the three of us make together.

\* \* \*

Kansas is lovely. I'm sitting at the edge of a field at the end of a grove. The only sound is of the wind through the cottonwoods. It's beautiful, but I won't stay. The difficulty I have in living here is this: my conversations are long distance. I write this in your absence; I hope

that Catherine and Harriet will tell me if my voice doesn't carry.

\* \* \*

These kinds of insecurities. My caring too much. Will they like it? Will Harriet and Catherine be pleased? And you: contributors, authors, readers--will you like it?

I've been insecure before--but not like this. The other time the situation was not complex; it was critical, but resolvable. The reversal came in June. I had been miserable for four long months. I had assumed they were right, the women who told me it was shitty to publish except with a woman. And I was miserable because, while I believed they *must* be right, I did not see that they *were* right. I did not see a principle; nor could I understand why, if there *was* a principle, they chose to bully rather than to explain; but still I believed they had to be right. So I was intimidated, and I agonized for four months--until Catherine and Harriet told me they wanted to see me. They felt I had lost my self-confidence and they were concerned. Their therapy was to give me this assignment. "Write about your two years," they said. So I went to Florida and I did write, as an exorcism, and in Jacksonville I found the first (non-paper) community I've known. And I recovered my self-confidence.

This one is more difficult--wanting to please women I love.

\* \* \*

Later. I experience so much anxiety writing this. Why? Because I'm sworn to tell the truth. The truth is my anger is still alive.

\* \* \*

Dear Catherine and Harriet, Sunday, October 3, 1976

I don't want to write this--it is too painful. Yesterday I sat near the Smoky Hill River and the wind blew through the cottonwoods and I wrote and I was bored. Then my anger came back with a force that surprised me.

In June, you'd asked each other, "What if Beth can't do the November issue?" I was a wreck then and you knew it. You insisted that I drive to North Carolina and you, Catherine, sat me down. You said, "You've lost your self-confidence, Beth." I didn't like hearing it but I loved you for caring enough to tell the hard truth. Before I left North Carolina, both of you told me to write about my two years--for the November *Sinister Wisdom*, you said, but I suspected you thought writing would be good therapy. Whatever--I wrote; and it was excellent therapy.

But now it's time to write for publication and now writing is not therapy, it's a source of intolerable anxiety. I wasn't anxious at first--at first my memories bored me so, I couldn't stand to record them. That was, until the past revived. Those feelings have *not* been exorcised, I discovered. And the boredom I experienced was my refuge from the pain.

I didn't want to bring up those four months. I am angry that I took seriously women who respected neither me nor their position enough to represent the position to me. I am angry that although my taking them seriously cost me my self-confidence, I still don't know why I shouldn't edit with Tom Montag. I am angry that I said "*Sinister Wisdom*" and the matter was ended for them; I was at last a feminist editor--editing for *Sinister Wisdom* made me that, right?--so who cared that I wasn't a believer or that I was too wrecked to function? I am angry to have suffered a broken spirit for no purpose and for no principle.

I don't want to write the article, friends--I feel too much anxiety.

Beth

Friday, October 8, 1976: Sunday was the third day of my writing notes for the article. I had been holding back--from the beginning. Sunday I realized I would continue to hold back--for as long as I was writing for publication. So I wrote a letter which I knew would *not be published*.

Then I read it through from the beginning, my three days of notes. And I saw that the process of the writing was itself a story. Since Sunday I haven't been making notes. I've been doing all the things one does when it's midterm and all the things one does when it's time to get an issue to its publishers. But what started on Sunday did not stop. Once I began feeling anger, I was *angry*--and for the next two days I was angry with everyone in turn. Then my anger was exorcized.

In between the classes and the exams and the last minute editing, I was rewriting. Monday I worked on what I'd written Friday; Tuesday on what I'd written Saturday; and Wednesday, Sunday. From Monday through Wednesday my emotions were so intense and their progress so drastic, that rewriting was difficult. The temptation was always to add to what I'd written three days earlier. Rewriting, I was always three days more experienced emotionally than I'd been when I had written and I was usually more interested in my present perspective than in the partial insights of my younger self. I had to try not to write anything in.

Now I'll tell you about the anger and its exorcism. I was feeling quite sorry for myself that my editing career had to end. I can't edit, I said, unless I have autonomy. And there is no way to have autonomy in a publication put out by radical feminists. Finding women publishers is inevitably to end my editing. So I was angry with the women who pressured me to find women publishers.

I found it impossible to answer to my reviewers. So I was angry with them.

The responsibility I had to the women of *Sinister Wisdom* was in conflict with the responsibility I felt I had to the reviewers. I had answered to the women of *Sinister Wisdom* before I had answered to my reviewers. So I was angry with Harriet and Catherine.

Tuesday night I was working on the writing I'd done Saturday. When I came to contrast working with Tom and working with Harriet and Catherine, I had to think (my note said only: I care H. & C. approve). I was suddenly wonderstruck. If I had started a magazine I know what it would mean to me. And I would not readily trust someone else to edit, most especially at first. So how came these women to let me share in their creation? I didn't know; the wonder of it was too great; I was overwhelmed.

\* \* \*

I haven't concluded anything. Tuesday night I was filled with love for Catherine and Harriet again. And Wednesday, even reworking the section that had been so threatening, I felt invulnerable: I would not be brought down again. I would make my own decisions about where I'd publish. And I'd laugh at trashers. I was quite pleased to have resolved all my feelings. Now I was strong and free of the past. Then I remembered...Tuesday. Tuesday was the day my anger ended, the moment I was wonderstruck. Tuesday was also the day I began my period.

---

Dear Beth,

Sunday, October 17, 1976

Any way you look at it, publishing is bad business--whether engaged in by multinational capitalist conglomerates or by masochistic lesbians. Conglomerates have taken over patriarchal publishing *because* publishing is bad business. It may be a tax write-off for Gulf and Western, but that's not the most pressing reason they publish. Corporate America controls establishment publishing because control of communications ensures control of politics and industry. Feed the people what you want them to think; for that minority of the population who reads, feed them books that--with sophistication, with some subtlety--tell them what to think (and best of all, feed them enough radicalism so they believe they're not being manipulated). If you control the intellectual life of the nation, you kill revolution because revolution begins in the mind. You publish books and journals that continue the crippling process begun in the schools. Your goal: a satiated, cynical, pseudo-sophisticated populace. What June Arnold (*Quest*, Summer, 1976) called "the finishing press" (because it intends to finish our movement) and "the hardcover of corporate America" exists primarily to kill revolution.

The lesbian presses exist primarily to make revolution. They don't exist to create an alternate economy (a chain of lesbian laundries would make more money); they don't exist as models for what-it-will-look-like-after-the-revolution (how COULD they?); they don't exist as romantic lesbian enclaves (any woman who publishes commits herself to communicating, not to isolating herself with her friends); and they

don't exist primarily to make the lesbian writers they publish feel good. There may be side-benefits: some of us will make subsistence salaries someday; some of us will develop ways of working together that are less patriarchal than before; some of us will spend most of our days with like-minded lesbians; some of us may feel so good we'll get orgasmic thinking on that 1250 Multilith that's running off our work. But the point remains the point: *every genuinely feminist work of art is a blow at the heart of patriarchal reality.* When lesbians control our own publishing and our own printing and our own distributing of our own words, we're directing those blows to the target.

Nothing gets done without a great passion in the doing of it. Lukewarm lesbian prose and lukewarm support of lesbian publishing has the same effect--it means we will fail because we've already been absorbed. What word we want to say here badly enough to overcome our fear of saying it, is... *fanatical*. We love women who are fanatical in the pursuit of anti-patriarchal revolution (give us another word for it; we need a new word, one of our words, not that old word 'revolution' that connotes death, when women have died enough, when we've hardly ever begun to live without falling into self-sacrifice.) You know as well as we know that inertia and cowardice are our most insidious enemies because they're the weapons we use against ourselves. We fight ineffectually because somewhere in us we want to fail; we want to be beaten so we can give up the task, an intolerable task, of sustaining a reality that is counter to everything we've been taught is real. Lesbian literature is central to sustaining the reality we create together; when we fail our words, we fail our new selves...and we'll die for those failures.

You said that you were made to suffer for no purpose and for no principle. But there is a political principle underlying an independent feminist lesbian press that we treat and regard and work for as the real press: *power*. You wrote in *Margins*: "Men pretend that lesbian sexuality is a threat to society. Lesbian sexuality is *not* threatening. Men claim that in order to mask their real fear, their fear of woman's power. Man is afraid of the woman in touch with her power, the woman claiming her power. The woman-identified woman *is* frightening--she knows man's secret, that he fears and hates her, and that he has structured an entire system to keep knowledge of her tremendous power from herself and to prevent her from actualizing her power."

A lesbian is by definition a woman *with* women, and women together generate power. The quintessential form of feminist power is not what men have called "power"--hierarchical and violent relationships in which the "powerful" dominate the "weak"--but rather what Mary Daly called "power of presence to each other and power of absence to the oppressor."

Elizabeth Janeway talks about the effects of our "absence" on patriarchal powercenters: "...the powerful are as ambivalent about the weak as the weak are about power and their relation to it. On the one hand, the powerful regard the weak with contempt, as a population of suckers and boobs,

easily fooled and manipulated. This seems highly rational, on the face of it. But the powerful are also afraid of the weak. Why should they be, if power is nothing but dominance and submission? If the world model of power as dominance and submission is true, one possible answer is that the powerful are crazy. They should have nothing *real* to fear, since they are already dominant...But what if the powerful do in fact have reason for fearing the weak? What if we live in a not-absurd world and the guilt of the powerful is not merely neurotic but based on the existence of some real capacity which is in the possession of the weak? What, then, do they want from us?...They want not to be crazy. They want to escape from guilt. They want the legitimization of their power by our consent either in secular or mythic terms. absence of response frightens the powerful, for it tells them that the power relationship has dissolved. Whether they ever consciously were aware that it existed, they know on the nerve ends when it is gone." (*Signs*, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 105.)

When we treat our presses as the real press and we fight for them with every weapon we have and we give our best work to them, we refuse legitimacy to the patriarchal press. Even supposing that our real goal was to take over that press--or to perform a kind of political karate, using the weight of the patriarchal press to destroy the patriarchal press--our base for doing this is the independent feminist press. If the boycott against *Mother Jones* succeeds, it will be because feminist writers read the feminist press, according legitimacy to the words of the women calling for a boycott, and because those same feminist writers have an outlet for their own words in the feminist press.

The feminist movement is being absorbed from the right and from the left; the absorption happens by way of a combined seduction and betrayal, tactics that are 5000 years old. *SEDUCTION*: Susan Brownmiller got \$250,000 for the paperback rights to *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. She's the carrot; the Barbara Walters. (Never mind that it won't happen again or that Brownmiller would never have been one of *Time's* dozen "Women of the Year" if she hadn't softened the book's conclusions.) And *BETRAYAL*: harassment by the post office and the IRS, *Big Mama Rag's* office burglarized, the theft of San Diego's Center for Women's Studies and Services subscription files. There's a reason why we need to throw our weight behind the lesbian presses *now*. In five years we may not have the choice.

We think that the women who put pressure on you to publish with women were operating on a sound principle: "power of absence to the oppressor." But power of absence doesn't work unless it's effected by a "power of presence to each other."

Talk about pain, Beth. There's no way for it to be easy, working with lesbians. We mean too much to each other, and the margin we operate on is so narrow--a tenth-story ledge above careening traffic (and the crowds below chanting "jump! jump! jump!") But what choices do we have? You can publish

again with Montag, but what will you learn? We could print again with a cheap non-union white male shop in Clover, South Carolina, but our strength depends finally on the strength of the feminist publishing and printing and distributing network, and so we print with Leslie and Nancy in Durham. We need them and they need us. There's a time lag, but by keeping this issue in feminist hands from mindflash to bookstore, we gain all these things: we solidify our ties with each other; we learn the whole time we're doing; we recycle our money; we reach more lesbians with a journal written just for them; we strengthen the chain that will make this possible in the future; and, most importantly, we create breakthroughs in the content, in the vision BECAUSE we are so clear about this: we are not justifying our lives before the world, we are talking to women. We have something to say, and the women we struggle with all along the process of writing, editing, printing, distributing, keep us honest and to-the-point. They also give us a great deal of anxiety. But so would the men and the non-feminist women, and for less good reasons.

Our failures in staying really *present* to each other are the source of our pain...and of the cynicism that's an aftermath of pain. We hardly know how to begin overcoming our separations except to keep talking and to keep sharing that talk in print.

And to keep in front of our eyes what we can do if we do it together: with income and skill-sharing, with a very political passion, with our own labor and vision, we can create a press that breaks down the patriarchal elitism of print. We can create black lesbian presses; we can salvage writing time for women with children; we can distribute to closet lesbians in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; we can create a communications bond between women that works and that speaks in the voice of the resistance. None of this is possible with the patriarchal press. The literary-industrial establishment exists to make equal communication *impossible*.

And not only what we can do but what we are going to do now: distribute this issue to more lesbians than ever saw *Margins*.

*Harriet and  
Catherine*

## QUESTIONNAIRE

There is unfeminine, (but oh, so Female)  
sureness in my hands,  
checking "No." to every question  
in the Harris poll, Reader's Digest,

Mademoiselle,

I am an outlaw, so none of that applies to me:  
I do not vote in primaries, do not wish to increase  
my spending power, do not take birth control  
pills.

I do not have a legal residence, cannot tell you  
my given name or how (sometimes very) old  
I really am.

I do not travel abroad, see no humor in uniforms,  
and my lips are good enough for my lover  
as they are.

Beyond that, no one heads my household, I would not  
save my marriage if I had one, or anybody else's  
if I could.

I do not believe that politicians need me, that Jesus  
loves me, or that short men are particularly sexy.  
Nor do I want a penis.

What else do you have to offer?

© Susan Saxe  
Philadelphia, 1975

*"Questionnaire" is part two of a poem entitled  
"Notes from the First Year."*

RECENT LESBIAN TITLES FROM FEMINIST PRESSES



-annethracevirginiaruffulo

(This is a list, as complete as we could make it, of lesbian literature issued in late 1975 and 1976 by the independent feminist presses. All titles may be ordered directly; press addresses are given at the end of the listings.)

LESBIAN LITERATURE: THE HERITAGE

- Elly Bulkin & Joan Larkin, eds. *Amazon Poetry* (OUT AND OUT) 110 pp. \$2.00.
- Gina Covina & Laurel Galana, eds. *The Lesbian Reader: An Amazon Quarterly Anthology* (AMAZON) 247 pp. \$4.50 postpaid.
- Gene Damon, Jan Watson, Robin Jordan *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* 2nd edition, 1975, 2500 entries coded and annotated (NAIAD) 96 pp. \$7.00.
- Gene Damon *Lesbiana: Book Reviews from The Ladder 1966-72* introd: Ann Leeson (NAIAD) 330 pp. indexed, \$5.00.
- Gene Damon (Barbara Grier) *The Possibilities are Staggering* speech before 2nd Annual Lesbian Writers' Conference, Chicago, 1975 (WOMANPRESS) 16 pp. \$.65.
- Jeannette Foster *Sex Variant Women in Literature* re-issue of 1955 pioneer study w/ afterword by Barbara Grier (DIANA) 420 pp. indexed, \$8.00.

--Coletta Reid & Barbara Grier, eds. *Lesbian Lives: Biographies of Women from The Ladder; The Lesbian Home Journal: Stories from The Ladder; and The Lavender Herring: Essays from The Ladder* (DIANA) \$5.00 each.

--Valerie Taylor *For My Granddaughters* speech before 1st Annual Lesbian Writers' Conference, Chicago, 1974 (WOMANPRESS) 16 pp. \$.50.

--*Women Loving, Women Writing* anthology of poetry and prose from 2nd Annual Lesbian Writers' Conference (WOMANPRESS) 128 pp. \$3.95.

--Renee Vivien *A Woman Appeared to Me* 1904 French novel, transl. Jeannette Foster, introd. Gayle Rubin (NAIAD) 135 pp. \$3.50.

#### FICTION:

--Sarah Aldridge *Cytherea's Breath* (NAIAD) 240 pp. \$5.00.

--June Arnold *Sister Gin* (DAUGHTERS) 224 pp. \$4.00.

--Sandy Boucher *Assaults and Rituals* (MAMA'S) 49 pp. \$2.50.

--Rita Mae Brown *In Her Day* (DAUGHTERS) 196 pp. \$4.50.

--Elana Dykewoman *They Will Know Me By My Teeth: Stories & Poems of Lesbian Struggle, Celebration and Survival* Megaera Press (distr. OLD LADY BLUE JEANS) 117 pp. \$3.75 postpaid. To be sold to and shared by women only.

--Bertha Harris *Lover* (DAUGHTERS) 214 pp. \$4.50.

--Sonya Jones *The Legacy* (VANITY) \$3.95 postpaid.

--Robin Jordan *Speak Out, My Heart* (NAIAD) 148 pp. \$4.00.

--Hadden Luce *After the Prom* (VANITY) \$3.00.

--Monique Wittig *The Oppoponax* (DAUGHTERS) 256 pp. \$4.50.

#### POETRY:

--Ellen Marie Bissert *The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Dyke* (VIOLET) \$3.00.

--Jan Clausen *After Touch* (OUT AND OUT) \$1.50.

--Jeannette Foster & Valerie Taylor *Two Women* (WOMANPRESS) 64 pp. \$3.25.

--Elsa Gidlow *Sapphic Songs: Seventeen to Seventy* (DIANA) 80 pp. photos, \$3.50.

--Judy Greenspan *To Lesbians Everywhere* (VIOLET) \$3.00.

--Sonya Jones *The Ultimate Dare* (VANITY) 48 pp. \$2.50.

--Irena Klepfisz *Periods of Stress* (OUT AND OUT) 61 pp. \$1.50.

--Joan Larkin *Housework* (OUT AND OUT) 79 pp., graphics \$3.00.

--d pat mattie *No Lies, No More, Not Now* from 61 Diamond St., San Francisco, Ca. 94114, \$2.35 postpaid.

--Billie Rensberger *The Subjugation of Woman or a loving brass book of lower-class trash* (ATHENA) 32 pp. \$2.00.

--Susan Saxe *Talk Among the Womenfolk* from Susan Saxe Defense Fund, c/o Philadelphia Nat'l. Lawyers' Guild, 1427 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19102, \$2.00 postpaid.

--Wendy Stevens *i am not a careful poet* 4110 Emery Place, Washington, D.C. 20016, 32 pp. \$1.50.

--Chocolate Waters *To The Man Reporter From The Denver Post* c/o Big Mama Rag, 1724 Gaylord St., Denver, Co. 80206, 45 pp. graphics, \$3.05 postpaid.

- Fran Winant *Dyke Jacket* (VIOLET) 64 pp. \$3.00.  
 --Writing-On *Collective Image* c/o Douglas, 3616 Conn. Ave.  
 N.W. #300, Washington, D.C. 20008, \$2.25 postpaid.

OF INTEREST:

- M.F. Beal *Safe House: A Casebook Study of Revolutionary Feminism in the 1970's*--the SLA Six and a study of violence and separatism as legitimate tactics (NORTHWEST MATRIX) 154 pp. \$4.00.  
 --Rita Mae Brown *A Plain Brown Rapper*--essays since 1969 (DIANA) 200 pp. \$5.00.  
 --Elsa Gidlow *Ask No Man Pardon: The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian* (DRUID HEIGHTS) 18 pp. photos, \$1.35 postpaid.  
 --Gorgons *The Lesbian Anti-Rape Packet* P.O. Box 4094, Seattle, Wa. 98104, \$1.00. To be sold to and shared by women only.  
 --Roberta Gregory *Dynamite Damsels*--comics, P.O. Box 4192, Long Beach, Ca. 90804, \$1.35 postpaid.  
 --Alice Molloy *In Other Words*. "This book may turn you into a lesbian anarchist paranoid schizophrenic witch." (WOMEN'S PRESS COLLECTIVE). Write for price.  
 --Juanita Weaver, ed. *Companions for the Journey: Women and Spirituality* 1710-19th St. N.W. Washington, D.C. 20009, \$4.50.  
 --Mary Wings *Come Out Comix* (distr. AMAZON REALITY) 32 pp. \$1.00 postpaid.  
 --Max Xarai *Witch Dream: Matriarchal Comix* (WOMEN'S PRESS COLLECTIVE) 35 pp. \$1.50.  
 --Sexuality titles: see page 72.

PRESSES AND DISTRIBUTORS

- AMAZON PRESS, 395-60th St., Oakland, Ca. 94618.  
 AMAZON REALITY, Distributors, P.O. Box 95, Eugene, Ore. 97401.  
 ATHENA PRESS, c/o Rensberger, 4417 Westminster, St. Louis, Mo. 63108.  
 DAUGHTERS, INC., Plainfield, Vt. 05667. (Add 35¢ per book postage & handling.)  
 DIANA PRESS, 12 W. 25th St., Baltimore, Md. 21218. (Add 15% postage & handling.)  
 DRUID HEIGHTS BOOKS, 685 Camino del Canyon, Mill Valley, Ca. 94941.  
 MAMA'S PRESS, 2500 Market St., Oakland, Ca. 94607.  
 THE NAIAD PRESS, INC., c/o *The Ladder*, Box 5025, Washington Station, Reno, Nev. 89513. (Add 25¢ per book postage & handling.)  
 NORTHWEST MATRIX, 1628 E. 19th St., Eugene, Ore. 97405.  
 OLD LADY BLUE JEANS, Distributors, P.O. Box 515, Northampton, Mass. 01060.  
 OUT AND OUT BOOKS, 44 Seventh Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217. (Add 25¢ per book postage & handling.)  
 THE VANITY PRESS, P.O. Box 15064, Atlanta, Ga. 30333.  
 VIOLET PRESS, Box 398, New York, N.Y. 10009.

WOMANPRESS, Box 59330, Chicago, Ill. 60645.  
THE WOMEN'S PRESS COLLECTIVE, 5251 Broadway, Oakland, Ca.  
94618. (Add 15% postage & handling.)

*Note: If the list price is not marked "postpaid" and the press address does not include postage and handling charges, add 15% to the list price of the book you are ordering.*

FOR PRE-1975 TITLES:

--Kirsten Grimstad & Susan Rennie, eds. *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook* 1975. \$5.00 from Knopf.

--Beth Hodges, guest ed. *Special Issue on Lesbian Feminist Writing and Publishing* August, 1975. \$1.00 from Margins, c/o Tom Montag, 2912 N. Hackett, Milwaukee, Wi. 53211.

FOR LISTING OF MAGAZINES:

--*Lesbian Connection*, Ambitious Amazons, Box 811, E. Lansing, Mi. 48823. (Monthly national newsletter, donation requested.)

--*The Lesbian Reader*

--*The Lesbian Tide*, March/April 1976, 1005B Ocean Ave., Santa Monica, Ca. 90403, \$.65.

---

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

JUNE ARNOLD is a co-founder of Daughters, Inc. and the author of *The Cook and the Carpenter* and *Sister Gin*.

SANDY BOUCHER is the author of *Assaults and Rituals*, a book of short stories published by Mama's Press, and is now finishing a novel about women living and working together.

RITA MAE BROWN, born 28 November 1944, Hanover, Pennsylvania. Her greatest shame in life is being born on the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon line. Her greatest glory is being able to laugh about it.

PAT CALIFIA is a poet who circulates clit propaganda in San Francisco. She is completing a book about lesbian sexuality. The whole world will know when it is finished because her lover Lois will give a loud whoop of joy.

JAN CLAUSEN, author *After Touch*, editor *Conditions*. "The Politics of Publishing" was completed with the generous assistance of the Department of Taxation and Finance, Unemployment Insurance Division.

DEBORAH CORE is a lesbian/feminist who lives and teaches in northern Ohio.

TEE CORINNE is 33, lives in San Francisco, loves women, drawing, photographs. She does book illustrations: *Cunt Coloring Book*, Joani Blank's *Playbooks* and *Good Vibrations*. Her graphics have appeared in *Womanspirit*, *Country Women*, *Lesbian Voices*, *So's Your Old Lady*.

LYNDALL COWAN is a free-lance editor and critic currently co-teaching a course in Lesbian literature at San Francisco State. She's mostly involved with her two cats, women, plants, Aikido, and psychic research.

- FRANCES DOUGHTY. "I saw a lot of trees, but no forest, while straight and academic. Evolution to feminism and lesbianism gave me a place from which to begin dealing with wholes. I feel a growing pull to that which nourishes inner life, curiosity about others', but shy about it."
- PAMELLA FARLEY is a co-coordinator in the Women's Studies Program at Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is working to build regional and national associations for those engaged in feminist education and work projects.
- BARBARA GRIER (GENE DAMON) edited *The Ladder*, compiled *The Lesbian in Literature* (with help), wrote many things for bread and a few for love, but is first, last, and always a reviewer. She has always tried to follow the dictates of her conscience in this regard (see page 65).
- SUSAN GRIFFIN is 33. A feminist, lesbian, poet. Her collection of poetry, *Like the Iris of an Eye*, is published by Harper and Row this month. She is currently writing a long work: *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*.
- BERTHA HARRIS is the founder of a yet-unnamed feminist review of books and the author of *Lover*, just published by Daughters, Inc.
- BETH HODGES. Last year her motto was "Margaret Anderson or nothing." This year she would settle for a sailboat and a job in Florida.
- RHEA JACOBS lives and writes in St. Louis, Missouri.
- MELANIE KAYE. Her poetry collective just published *Naming* (\$2.25 postpaid from Olive Press, 333 S.E. 3rd, Portland, Oregon 97214).
- JACQUELINE LAPIDUS is a lesbian feminist poet living in Paris. Her collection of poetry, *Starting Over*, will be available in January from Out & Out Books.
- JOAN LARKIN is a poet (*Housework*), founder of Out & Out Books, co-editor of *Amazon Poetry*. She is a lesbian mother who lives in Brooklyn with her nine-year-old daughter, Kate.
- MARIANNE LIEBERMAN charlotte nc. "I like the challenge of feminist imagery. To look for new visual experience keeps me in touch with myself and with women."
- AUDRE LORDE. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Coal*, was published in May by W.W. Norton.
- JUDITH MCDANIEL is a lesbian feminist writer and teacher currently working at Skidmore College.
- DEENA METZGER. "I am director of the Writing Program of the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building. In my work, teaching, writing, I look to discovering and expressing the deepest most authentic woman's voice."
- SUSAN SAXE. "These poems are a part of me, and if right now I cannot walk with you under the stars and tell you, 'This is who I am,' at least I can give you these fragments of myself and tell you, 'This is what I wrote.'" (from the foreword to *Talk Among the Womenfolk*)
- MARTHA SHELLEY is a certified public hitchhiker. Her poems *Crossing the DMZ* were published by The Women's Press Collective.

SUSAN SHERMAN. "I think all my life I have loved women. Have been in love with what I am, what I wanted to be. With what I thought was beautiful. Gentle. With what I wanted, gently, beautifully, to touch, to be."

JULIA PENELOPE STANLEY has recently been described by a colleague as "bright but fierce." When asked if she would elaborate, she declined to comment.

BEVERLY TANENHAUS. "Three years ago, proclaiming myself Ms. Tanenhaus won me the dubious title of radical feminist on a conservative college campus at the foothills of the Catskills. Writing about, talking to, corresponding with my sister poets kept me alive and well in these beautiful, isolated hills."

JULIA WILLIS is in good health and having a fine time and wishes you the same.

BONNIE ZIMMERMAN has a Ph.D. in English and is now a free-lance comp teacher and a "fellow" at the Newberry Library. Among other movement work, she used to write for *Lavender Woman*.

## SINISTER WISDOM

*Sinister Wisdom* is published three times a year. It contains essays, fiction, poetry, drama, reviews and graphics. Its purpose is to develop a lesbian imagination in politics and art.

Individual subscriptions are \$4.50 for three issues. Single copies of Vol. I, No. 1 (July, 1976) available for \$2.00. Vol. I, No. 3 (Spring, 1977): "A Sinister View of Humanism...and other things."

Submissions are always welcome. (s.a.s.e. please)

Address subscriptions, submissions and correspondence to:

Catherine & Harriet  
3116 Country Club Drive  
Charlotte, N.C. 28205

Bookstore orders from:

Women in Distribution  
Box 8858  
Washington, D.C. 20003

Printed by Whole Women Press  
Durham, N.C.

Bound by Diana Press  
Baltimore, Md.

2.50

# SINISTER WISDOM

Special Issue:  
LESBIAN WRITING  
& PUBLISHING

EDITED BY BETH HODGES