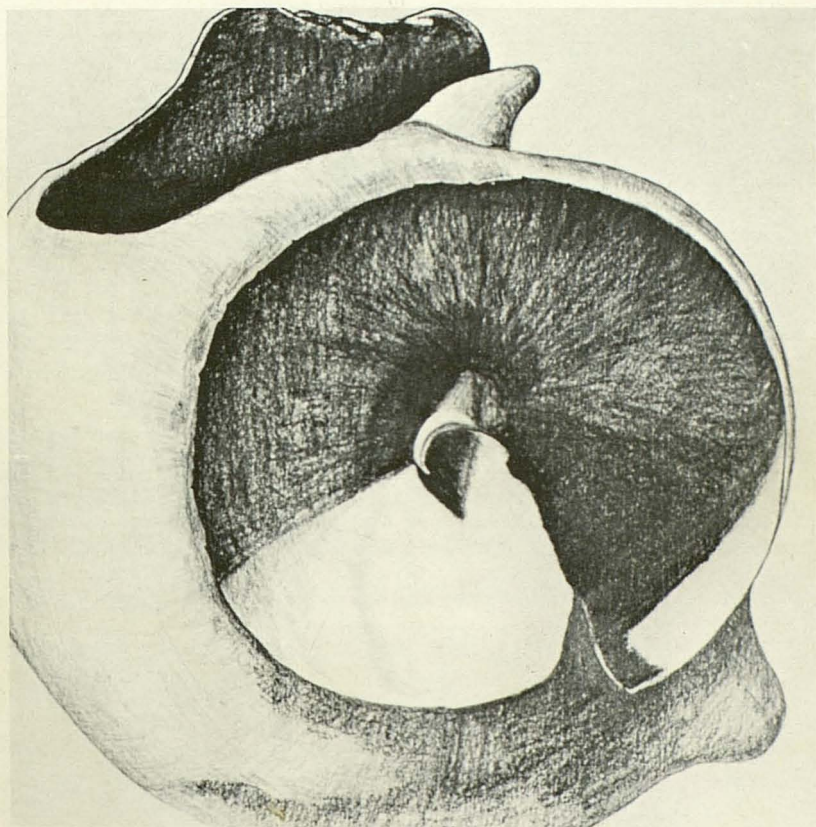


SINISTER WISDOM





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SINISTER WISDOM

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The Silver Window

for Jo Carrillo

tells me I'm a thick & simple woman
whose hands have washed many plates, cups, bowls
says my hair is a long dark sweep knotted in a past I don't sing
eyes deep as the earth I turn over for squash & peas
my face a map of disease survived my skin has followed the sun
to a rainy place where a blue heron nests silently
the silver window tells a story of who I am when
others look
you could easily see that I fold the clothes & sweep the floor
for a living
a face of the plains my family crossed
one that echoes wild rice, elk, traded corn
from the place of light
The silver window covers my memories like snow
melted in a day
They say I dance behind
a silver window could say so
but I'll tell you
this morning
I rose
from dreams
a slow moving lake deep with fish
many birds in the grasses
this morning
the silver window was blank
with my beauty
this morning I came
with the sun
burning off mist
I sang all the way to the bottom

Vision: Bundle

for Barbara Cameron

within/mystery wrapped in torn deer hide
we cannot speak of
the sacred
our mother is what they want to strip: pull out her bones
fuel their air conditioners
unconditioned air is the one
we breathe
speaks to us
tongues of stars, wind, times to plant, the times to be
silent
they have a machine for everything
even this
one soul looking for a song that we might dream
a smooth place where we might dance together without
separation
the button pushes them
we live trapped in places we can't dig out of or move
walls hold the old voices
want to be taken down & aired, go to a new place
no one speaks our languages
my father is ashamed of
my mother won't think
we've dead relatives & friends with no common burial place
scattered
they say we are vanishing
leaves of autumn
red dust that is raked away
so the snow can fall flat
they have our bundles split open in museums
our dresses & shirts at auctions
our language on tapes
our dances on film
the only part they can't steal
is what we know

5-21-81 (written for her birthday on the 22nd)

A Restricted Country

When the plane landed on the blazing tar strip, I knew Arizona was a new world. My mother and brother stared with me out at the mountain-fringed field of blue. The Nestles three on their first vacation together had crossed the Mississippi and entered the shining new land of the American west. The desert day air hit us with its startling clarity; this was not the intimate heat of New York, the heat that penetrated flesh and transformed itself into our sweat and earned our curses. We walked through it, like the others, and stood waiting for the station wagon to pick us up. I should have known from the skeptical look on my mother's face that we were in for trouble, but I chalked up her skepticism to the fact that she had never traveled further west than New Jersey. My brother's new job at American Airlines had made this trip possible; the company compensated for its low wages by offering its employees special cut-rate vacation packages and many of his fellow-workers had recommended this one-week stay at the Shining Star Guest Ranch as the best bargain. Since the moment he had told us of the possibility to the time we were standing in front of the Tucson airport, I could not believe that the trip was really going to happen. I had dreamed horses all my sixteen years, played wild stallion in the Bronx vacant lots that were my childhood fields, had read every book about wild horses, mustangs, rangy colts that I could find, and through all the splintering agonies of my family I had galloped on plains that were smooth and never-ending. For my brother, who had seldom been with my mother and me, this was both a reunion and an offering. After years of turmoil, mistakes, and rage, he was giving us the spoils of his manhood. He lay this vacation at the feet of our fatherless family as if it were a long-awaited homecoming gift. For my mother it was a simple thing, her week's vacation from the office, her first trip in over twenty years.

We finally spotted the deep purple station wagon that bore the ranch's name and hurried to it. A large man in a cowboy hat asked if we were the Nestle family, looked at us intently and then fell silent as he loaded our suitcases into the wagon. We rode through the out-

skirts of Tucson and continued into the desert. The man never said another word to us and feeling the strangeness of the desert, we too fell silent. Cacti rose around us, twisted strong creatures that, like the untouching heat, seemed only to tolerate the temporary intrusion of roads and people into their world. I felt the desert clumps of tufted grass under my feet, I was already moving with my horse's haunches; for now it was only a sheet of glass that separated me from Annie Oakley. Dusk came suddenly and the heat fled.

We pulled into the ranch and another man poked his head into the front window and stared at the three of us. "Do you want fish or meat for dinner" were his only words. My mother answered that it made no difference, meat would be fine. Everything was still in the blue-black night as we were shown our rooms and then led to the dining room. The room was long, low-roofed with heavy beams; a fireplace glowed at one end. All the other guests were seated at the same table, ladling out huge portions of food from communal platters. We were seated at the long last table, a far distance from the others, near the large stone fireplace. As our places were being set, I noticed the waitress place a small white card near each of our plates. I picked up mine and read, "because this guest ranch is run like a family, we are restricted to members of the Gentile faith only." I could not envision the chain of events that our arrival had set in motion. The man who peered in at us must have realized that we were Jewish, rushed in to tell his boss, who pulled out the appropriate cards to be served with our dinner. My brother and I sat stunned, my mother said we would talk to the manager after dinner. As I tried to eat, the voices of the other guests caught in my throat. I had grown up with the language of the garment district, I knew the word goy, but this was my introduction to Gentiles. We can't stay here, my mother said. My brother kept saying he was sorry, he didn't know. How could his co-workers recommend this place, how could American Airlines have a working agreement with such a place. But this rational questioning was simply words. When we finished, my mother asked to speak to the manager. She and my brother were led to his office. I stayed outside in what seemed to be a reading room. I paced the room, looking at the books lining the wall. Finally I found what I knew had to be there: a finely bound volume of *Mein Kampf*. For one moment, it wasn't 1956 but another time, a time of flaming torches and forced marches. It wasn't just my Jewishness that I learned at that moment; it was also the stunning reality of exclusion unto death; it

was the history lesson of those judged not to be human and I knew our number was legion and so were our dyings.

Huddled in the privacy of our room, my mother and brother told me what the manager had said. Since it was off-season, he was willing to compromise. If we told no one we were Jewish, if we left and entered through the back door, and if we ate our meals by ourselves, we could stay. We looked at each other. Here was an offer to the Nestles to pass as Gentiles. To eat and walk in shame.

We waited until the morning to tell the manager our decision. I stayed in our room while my mother and brother went in for breakfast. In a strange twist of feeling, my anger had turned to shyness. I thought of the priest I had noticed sitting at the table the night before and I could not bear the thought of making him see we were human, I could not bear the challenge to his geniality that we would represent. After breakfast, the three of us entered the manager's office to tell him we would not stay under his conditions.

I stared at the man as my mother spoke for us, looking for his embarrassment, waiting for the moment when he would say this was all a joke. His answer was that he was sure we would not want to stay someplace we were not wanted but there was a Jewish dude ranch several miles away and perhaps the owners would consider allowing us to stay there for the same price. He made the call for us, saying, "by mistake some of your people came here." The voice on the other end agreed to take us. Once again we were ushered into the station wagon and driven to a parking lot in downtown Tucson. We sat on the curb waiting for the new station wagon to pick us up. The men walking by wore big brown belts with turquoise stones embedded in the leather, pointed boots, and wide-brimmed hats. The sun shone with that same impersonal heat and the shimmering mountains were still waiting for us in the distance.

2

When the station wagon pulled into our new destination, we were greeted by a small circle of elderly guests who welcomed us with hugs and low-voiced comments to my mother about "the kinder." After the novelty of our sad mistake wore off, the three of us were left to our own devices. As the youngest person at the ranch, I was indulged in my unladylike ways. Riding clothes were lent to me, and my desire to smell as much like a horse as possible was humorously accepted. My brother spent his time playing tennis and dating a young woman who cleaned the rooms. As soon as it

grew dark, they would take off for the nearest town. My mother, however, had a harder time in our Jewish haven. All the other guests were retired wealthy married couples who moved with ease in this sunlit world. While they were sympathetic to my mother, a woman alone raising two kids, they were also embarrassed by her. She dressed wrong and did not know how to enjoy herself.

My mother was a dedicated gin and poker player and shortly after our arrival she tried to join the nightly card game; but here, under the Arizona sun, the stakes had multiplied beyond her resources. I watched her as she approached the table of cigar-smoking men; she sat for one round, growing smaller in her seat while the pile of chips grew bigger and bigger in the center of the table. She was a working-class gambler who played with her week's salary while these men played with their retired riches, and her seventh avenue bravado could not cover her cards. For the first time in my life, I saw my mother defeated by the people she said she despised. She could not fight the combination of a strange country, high fashion, pity, money, and physical exaltation.

One afternoon I saw a crowd of guests gesturing and laughing at something in the center of the riding ring. I pushed through and saw it was my mother. Dressed in her checked polyester suit, she sat on top of a large brown gelding attempting to move it. She rocked back and forth in the saddle as if she was on a rocking horse or making love, while voices called out to her, "Come on Regina, kick him; you can do it." The intimate spectacle of my mother's awkwardness, the one-sided laughter, and the desperate look on her face pushed me back from the railing. These people were my people; they had been kind to me. But something terrible was going on here. We were Jewish but we were different.

One afternoon towards the end of our stay I went in search of my mother. I looked by the pool, in the lounge, and everywhere else the other guests habitually gathered but I could not find her. I wandered to the far end of the ranch and saw her in the distance. She was sitting on a child's swing, trailing one leg in the dust. A small round woman whose belly bulged in her too tight, too cheap pants. Her head was lowered and the air shimmered around her as if loneliness had turned to heat. Where was seventh avenue, the coffee shops, the crowded subways, the city which covered her aloneness because she had work to do there. Arizona was not for Regina Nestle; not this resort with its well-married athletic ladies. While I scrambled over this new brown earth, my mother sat in the desert, a silent exile.

Bill, the tired aging cowboy who ran the corral, was my date for the evening. Elliot was with Mary, a woman in her twenties who worked at the ranch. We had been to see a movie and were now parked behind the ranch house. Bill kissed me as we twisted around in the front seat. His bony hand pushed into my crotch while his tongue opened my mouth. I pushed his hand away, sure of what I wanted and of what I did not. I did not want his fingers in me, but I did want to hold his long tired body in my arms, I did want to see his cheek against my breast. My brother and Mary gave up their squirming in the back seat and left the two of us alone. Bill was respectful. One word from me was enough to get him to stop his attempts at penetration. "Lay in my arms," I told him. He slipped his long legs through the open window at one end of the front seat and leaned back into my arms. His lips pulled at my nipples. We sat that way for a long time as the Arizona sky got darker and darker. Right before he fell asleep, he said, "best thing that has happened to me in twenty years." I knew this had not very much to do with me, but a lot to do with my sixteen-year-old breasts. I sat there holding him for what seemed like hours, afraid to move because I did not want to wake him, when suddenly he jerked in his sleep and knocked into the steering wheel, setting off the horn. The desert air was split by its harsh alarm and I knew my idyll was coming to an end. One by one, the lights came on in the guest cottages. My brother was the first to reach the car, his pajamas shining white in the moonlight. "I'm alright, I'm alright," I whispered as I maneuvered my body away from Bill's. I wanted to escape before the other guests came pouring out to save Bill from having to explain what we were doing. He would be held responsible for breaking the boundaries between guests and workers, between young girls and old men, and I would never be able to convince them that I knew exactly what I was doing, that tenderness was my joy that night, that I danced in the moonlight knowing my body could be a home in the freezing desert air.

I spent most of my time around the horses, following Bill around on his daily chores. He eventually gave me his chaps to wear because I was constantly riding into the choya plants and ending up with their needles sticking into my thighs. My horse for the week was not the sleek stallion I had dreamed of, but a fat wide-backed

white horse that was safe. Ruby and I were always on the tail end of the rides but I did not care; the Bronx streets had disappeared and I could bend over and talk to my steed while I stroked her powerful neck.

Each day we rode up into the mountains, the same mountains that had looked so distant from the airport. Our party was usually Elliot and myself, and Bill and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was a small muscular woman in her fifties whose husband was dying of Parkinson's disease. She had made my riding possible by lending me a pair of boots. Each morning, her husband, a large burly man who walked in tiny trembling steps, would stand in the doorway of their cottage and slowly raise his hand to wave goodbye. Elizabeth loved him deeply; and each morning I saw the grief on her face. She would ride her horse like a demon far up into the mountains, leaving the rest of us behind. As the week passed, I slowly realized that she and Bill were lovers. I saw the tenderness between them as if it were an invisible rope that kept them both from falling off the rocky hills. Like two aging warriors, both grey and lean, they fought off sadness with sharp, quick actions. We would ride up into the mountain clefts, find a grassy spot to stretch out in the afternoon sun, and silently be glad for each other's company. I never spoke or intruded on their moments together. I just watched and learned from their sad tough erotic connection all I could bear about illness and love and sexuality. On the way home, stumbling down the stony trails, I would ride as close as I could to these two silent adults.

It was our last ride together and we had come down the mountains on a different path. We found a dirt road, smooth enough for cars, and I started to see real estate signs announcing that this area was the most restricted community in Arizona. I pushed my horse closer to Elizabeth and Bill and asked, "What does restricted mean?" "No Jews allowed," Elizabeth answered. I looked around again in wonder at this land we were moving through. The distant hills had become known and I loved this earth so different from my own. I silently rode beside my two older friends, wanting to be protected by their gentle toughness, and not understanding how the beauty of the land could be owned by ugliness. It was all so mixed up for me, the discovery of a new land, a new night sky, the class loneliness of my mother, my growing sexuality, the essential joy of riding my horse, and the threatening punishing connection between property, privilege, and hatred.

A Spoiled Identity

Martha Courtot

The main body of this speech was delivered at Sonoma State University, Sonoma County, California, at a lecture sponsored by Ruth Mahaney of the Women's Studies Department.

I would like to give credit to Judith Freespirit and Vivian Mayer (Aldebaron) for their early courage and work on the subject of fat oppression.

My own work on the subject has also benefited from the work I've done with Cynthia Riggs and Hannah Banahn. The many supportive conversations we have had have become an integral part of my work. They will always have my gratitude for their spirit and courage in the face of so much opposing us all.

I wish that you could see me as I truly am. Instead, when you look at me what you see instead of the me that I am is a catalog of assumptions about fat women which manages to erase me from the situation. This is the experience of living with a spoiled identity.

Have I let myself go? Am I lazy and stupid? Do I sit at home all day eating chocolates and hating myself? Am I not smart enough to understand what good nutrition is? Am I a compulsive eater, out of control, not able to stop myself from gorging on food? All of these assumptions come directly from your head to surround the real person I am. And because I know these assumptions are there, or think that I know, I surround you with my own assumptions.

You will never be trustworthy! You are stupid for believing a cultural propaganda about fat women which is full of such obvious lies. You cannot allow yourself to be sexually attracted to fat women and so I will not risk my own vulnerability and open myself to you in this way. There is something cruel about you; you will always be something less than human to me, since to be human implies a consciousness of other people's pain — some understanding of the oppressions other people suffer from.

Thus you and I are both confronted by false personas as we look at each other. And all of this happens very quickly in the first few moments we see each other. It may be what we have to give each other could be important: but we will never know this.

It is not possible to unspoil this identity. If our sense of self could come only from within, then those among us who are strong could possibly work on affirming our beauty and strength and this would be enough. But human beings are social animals and from infancy on our identities are formed and grow from an interplay between the kernel of consciousness which is ourselves and the cacophony of contradictions which is the outer social world. So that by the time we are adults who we are is so layered by who the world says we are that we cannot escape from their judgments which now live inside us.

And these judgments are perilous to our integrity. It would be so much easier if I could direct my anger only at you—at your insensitivities and cruelties, which are many. But these cruelties now in adulthood have taken their place within me and when they speak to me it sounds like my own voice speaking, telling me how unworthy I am. It tells me not to risk when risk is the only thing I can do to survive. It tells me over and over again that I am fat and ugly, fat and ugly, fat and ugly — lazy, stupid, greedy, devouring: that I eat too much, take up too much space, that I do not deserve love.

At the end of this chain of hatred lies a monster in wait, ready to kill all that is self-loving in me. And the enemy within has so much material from the outside to batter me with! (Fat women in this culture *are* battered women.) And somewhere always in me is the kernel of pure self, which is loving to myself, which appreciates the strength and joy in my body, which tells me I do indeed deserve my presence on this earth, which reminds me this chain of hatred is forged with vicious lies, enemy lies, life-destroying . . . And so there is a constant war within.

While the outside war rages. And it is a war in which I am almost alone against the world. Experiment. Pretend you are a fat woman and watch television for a day. Count how many messages there are which tell you that you are ugly and must change. Listen to how many remarks your friends make about “being too fat” and diets they are on and having to lose weight when they are already thinner than you will ever be. Look through magazines for a positive image of a fat woman. Then imagine what it is like to be a fat woman walking down the street, at the mercy of everyone who has been given permission from this society to hate and despise her. What would you do when they called you names? Are you surprised then that fat women often do stay at home, do not get the exercise they need, do sometimes eat for comfort? Are you surprised? How

would you feel if you saw a bumper sticker which said "Save the whales — Harpoon fat chicks"?

Every day radical fat women are exposed to "radical" literature which pictures the fat capitalist devouring the thin "peasants." A very romantic image, but false. My mothers as many generations back as I have photographs of them have been fat, and we have all of us been poor. Not one banker among us hillbilly women. This myopic stereotyping is another example of the racist and classist bias which continues to dominate, whether it is the country clubs of the rich or the coffeehouses of the lesbian community.

If I let myself accept what the world, what you, say about me, I at least am able to reduce the conflict in my life. If I can act stupid and lazy, eat compulsively, disbelieve there is any sexuality in me, then I can conform to the world's view and I can live a life that is not contradictory to your view of me. I can be the jolly fat woman that you expect. I will make a great friend to you, because I will have no expectations of any return. You can take and take from me and I will never show you my anger. Instead I will turn my anger against my self: in the darkest parts of the night my rage and your ignorance will join to destroy me.

A different strategy in this war is to face the rage that is in me: rage at you for making me something I'm not, rage at myself for being a fat woman and thus vulnerable to all the cruelties this society has to offer "the other." I can give you my anger over and over again — I can refuse to accept what you say and think about me. I can explore my own insides and learn the truth about myself. Although this is a more satisfying and enriching life than self-abnegation, it is a life of constant conflict, anger, and dis-ease.

A third solution is to patiently devote my life to changing your attitudes. Giving lectures to classes of young women where perhaps all but one will walk away thinking "I will never let myself go like that" . . . doing performances in which all the risks are taken by me, the performer, while the audience sits in the dark hoarding its secret prejudices . . . writing essays and letters to editors of offending newspapers, trying to correct your assumptions . . . and all of this could take a lifetime of work and only my own life will have been used up — the work will still be there, to be done by other strong, surviving fat women. Meanwhile I am a poet who needs to be doing my own work of poetry which I insist is important, and I am a mother who needs to be mothering my daughters and I am a lesbian who needs to be loving women and doing other political

work. This "fat work" is exhausting to me, draining of some of my best energies, devouring parts of my life that are important to me. I can't escape from the resenting thought that I shouldn't have to be doing it: especially when you are a lesbian, I can't understand why you haven't made the crucial connections in regards to the oppression of fat women. My thought is that this is your work as much as it is mine. And I am needing for you to begin to do your share.

There is no doubt in my mind that this culture wants me, as a fat woman, dead. Whether this early death comes from the stress of oppression, economic exile, the steady harassment from a crazed culture, the toll of learning from an early age a terminal self-hatred, or whether it comes through the physical toll that diets, operations, and other abusive treatments that fat women are expected and encouraged to undergo (often by their best friends), the results remain as deadly.

Every day as a fat woman the hard core of self-respect and love which I have had to make for myself, insist on for myself, against the grain of the culture, against what almost all other women were saying to me, comes under assault. I really am fine as a fat woman. I am often beautiful. Unless I develop a wasting disease (as my grandmother did) I will never be thin. It has taken me many years to accept this about myself. I will not postpone my life any longer, not for anyone's standard of beauty. There are so many of us, it profits none of us to have to battle our own communities for the right to exist.

All of my life I have had the opportunity to acquire the skills of the oppressed, as a working-class fat woman. Learning how to listen, keen intuition, paranoia, becoming conscious: I have not been able to live as so many have, sleepwalking through others' lives. I learned early what damage words could do, and what an intensely powerful tool exclusion is. I learned this from the outside, and this knowledge informs every act of my life. I ask you now to learn this, to listen to my experience, and to change.

Women are bombarded with lies about ourselves from birth onward. It is not surprising that so many of us believe the lies. But for lesbians whose lives are already on the edge of fugitive, we cannot afford to encourage these lies in ourselves or in other women. Only the truth will save us. Not one of us can afford to feel good about ourselves because we are white, or thin, or middle-class, or young, or "able-bodied," or any of the other "safe" categories which are supposed to make women acceptable. Because when we

build our acceptance of self on such flimsy accidents of time and place, we are building cages for our sisters and hammering shut the locks. And we have sealed our own doom in a patriarchal consciousness which is deadening.

Those of us with "spoiled identities" are gifted with the role of the outsider. So I come here today as the outsider to tell you this: listen. pay attention. your mirrors are lying to you. and you, acting as a mirror to myself and other fat women, are lying to us; your fear of the "other," your fear of me, the fat woman, the Medusa, is turning your own life and future possibilities to stone. And you are doing real damage to lives without number.

Fight anti-fat propaganda. Fight it for your fat friends and for yourself. Learn the truth about women's lives. Learn how to recognize dangerous propaganda, even when it comes from women you trust. Break through the lies in yourself now, for all of our sakes. And take this work with you, to make a world that will be possible for all of us to live in, as self-affirming and beautiful women.

Finally, see me as I truly am.

USEFUL INFORMATION:

1. "Health" is one of the major bludgeons used against fat women. Isn't it really unhealthy to be fat? No, it is not more unhealthy to be fat. Many health problems that seem to be specific to fat people are actually caused by stress from oppression and constant dieting.

2. The medical approach to "obesity" becomes increasingly more technological and dangerous. Operations such as the Jejunoileal Shunt (which reduces the small intestine from twenty to two feet in order to cut nutrient absorption) endanger the lives of fat people, leaving them weakened, open to serious illness, and mutilated. Some women would rather accept this mutilation than live their life as a fat woman.

3. Dieting for fat women is an especially painful and ironic process. When the body receives the message that it is being given less food to nourish itself, it very efficiently organizes itself so that it *requires* less food. When the dieter attempts to return to a more normal eating pattern she discovers she now will eat less food to put on the same amount of weight. Each diet repeats this process, so that fat women who have dieted most of their lives can eat only very small amounts of food before gaining weight.

4. Many women identify themselves as being compulsive eaters. Some of these are fat women and some of them are non-fat women. Until we develop attitudes in this culture which accept eating as a natural need and enjoyment of life, rather than as an activity which women must go to great pains

to deny themselves, many women will relate to food in a compulsive manner. Some fat women have discovered that what they once identified as compulsive eating went away when they stopped compulsive dieting. Some fat women identify themselves as compulsive eaters because they believe what everyone is telling them about themselves: in this anti-fat culture which links the fat person to food, any food the fat person eats is seen as being a sin against herself and society and is identified as compulsive eating. For anyone to assume they know what a woman's eating patterns are by her weight is both foolish and oppressive.

5. Amphetamines, which are the major drugs of choice in relation to losing weight, are extremely addictive, require painful withdrawal (sometimes leading to psychosis), and are destructive to the general well-being of the person. Drugs sold over the counter without a prescription have recently been found to have serious side-effects, such as hallucinations.

6. It is probably true that many fat women do not get the exercise their bodies need. This is not because fat women as a group are any more sluggish and inactive by nature than their non-fat sisters, but rather the social risks which are required by fat women often do not seem worth the effort.

7. Studies have shown the success rates of diets over a five-year period to be between 2 to 3%. With those odds, would you risk your life and health?

8. Feminists agree that a woman should have control of her own body. Until fat women are able to accept and love their own bodies, no woman will really have the right to her own, because so much of the imprisonment of north american women has taken place in her mind.

9. My own surmise about fat and class is that there is a close correlation between fat and working-class and poor women. Certainly the standard of female beauty in north america is that of the white young anglo-saxon. Women of other racial groups and ethnic groups cannot achieve this "standard." In one study of New York women, by Stunkard, it was found that "obesity" was six times more common among women of the "lower social class" than of women of the upper social class. In this study, 30% of lower-class women were fat, 16% of middle-class women were fat, and 5% of upper-class women were fat. "Obesity" is also highly associated with ethnic origin.

10. There is a clear pattern of discrimination in the economic sphere against fat women. The Commission on Human Relations for the state of Maryland performed an extensive study of purported discrimination and has documented the results. Since there is evidence that being fat is related to one's racial or class origins, this is one more way the system acts to grind down the poor.

aug 28 4:30 a.m.

bundled in bedclothes but drinking the rest of the root beer & ice you brought — sweet & brown like you. the stars are very bright, orion grazing the eastern hill. you have just left because i needed more bed; i couldn't ask you that, but kicked & tugged & moaned almost as if i were alone, hating you for being here, confused by the big warm hand creeping to comfort me . . . i couldn't refuse its love. but still the night's confusion: dreams of not being able to sleep, of being burned by candles, of asking arl to leave my bed — these speckled the hours of waking stiff and aching, never warm enough. now with you gone — your offer, cause i could never ask, just writhe — i wake fully to write. to escape for half an hour that dark world where thought twists so and cannot be smoothed, where i would punish you for sharing my bed and beam my pain half across the continent waking my brother with "look, see, this is what i suffer" . . . and this is not really what i mean when i tell the universe that i would like to share my pain. awake, i shake the anger for remorse — zana, the anger's valid too, you just need to shout, not whine it. a hard lesson, maybe easier in the day and not when dark waters close over everything i've learned and nearly drown my struggles. i still cry out against the wave, though. don't tell me once again that i'm a survivor; i know that, but in the hours before dawn it is small consolation.

The Friend . . .

. . . who willingly tastes thirst
that pulp of oranges & grapes can't assuage,
who drinks in the dry cup companionship
while the empty pipes sing out tin winds,
the water tank's at sludge, the water trucks
can't climb the hill, the pump's dumb,
the bees sit in the sink, the beans
slump, & the long grass burns,

. . . who takes hunger, who calls a feast
to make hunger palatable, & consumes
celery threads, chard stems, avocado skins,
who makes the larder's barrenness a grace
& says, On this grace I feed, I wilt
in spirit if I eat flesh, let the hogs,
the rabbits live, the cows browse,
the eggs hatch out chicks & peck seeds,

. . . who has an innate beauty & strength,
walls of the mind to raise & sustain
a roof, rotted, who has grit
to fill the termite lace at the house's cellar-line,
whose arms lift & tent
this A-frame, & whose breath mists
in mild airs door lintels & window sills,
the ridges at the eaves,

. . . who being free lives with me, this house,
who lies on this couch of mold, this heart, this bleak space,
this age that needs her hopes, her new
hardihood to repair itself, to take in
like caulk to the interstices of time,
who comes to bless, as sweet rain comes
to fields to make all right again,
to rescue, to confront in me my summer death,

may deep breathe, for who has done
so much, who has taken willingly
to heart hunger & thirst, who has made
old structures sound, & given place
power to become what place was & returns to be,
shall have her turn to finally receive
such comforts as her own seasons swing, her spring recedes,
shall in turn have the same sustenance, the same greed.

Women at the Creek

They haven't dredged it—not this Spring
They'd promised to—the other years they did
making a swimming-hole where the black dog
named Blue took her age off and entered in
& showed the other dogs what Summer is.

I'd have gone in myself & so would you
if either of us had been alone or if
the trails home hadn't been so rough & steep
the ruts so cruel, the dust like silt
the corridors through the thorns so tall in bees

or if there'd been no chance the boys with bikes
would come burning down the cliff-face to the stream
—none of the boys' affair what women do
in their nakedness, what pleasures they use
their hips & thighs made water-free—or if

at any time between us we'd dared meet
ourselves as dryads, half-sunken half-perceived
in the pool the men had dredged, or if I'd been
readier to see your sadness in repose, or you
to face me in my own bulk of dreams.

— Virginia de Araújo

My Life Inside Out

When I was born I came into the world a little old lady, wetting my diapers for attention I did not get. To this day I will still try to get attention in negative ways. My nerves were like sharp razor blades. I was born near Holy Cross Cemetery. I was terrified of it by night, but daylight was another matter. It had beautiful chestnut trees, grass — it seemed more like a park. There were military funerals there, and the sound of gunfire was very impressive. There were Italian funerals with a band playing and women crying. There were statues and the sound of the stonecutters at work.

My first impression of my early childhood was far from pleasant. My mother's brother had come to visit, we were in my father's store when I said something. My father kicked me. Enraged, I left the store, not before I peed on the floor. The next day, my brother hit my sister, my sister started to cry, hearing my sister cry set me crying, which woke my father from his noon nap, and he came downstairs and gave me something to cry for. This still happens in the world today.

Little Mary Griner and I sat on the curb making up dirty stories about each other — using all the metaphors Freud did. I enjoyed the stories I made up about Mary, but not vice versa.

I was in the country and wrote my sister, asking her to send me a pair of knickers. She did, with a fly front. I believe she knew exactly what she was doing, because she always wanted me to walk on the outside. I went to school and my principal entered with report cards in her hand. She called my name. I stood up: mannish haircut, fly-front knickers. She called my name four times before becoming aware I was the person she was calling.

She told me to go home and tell my mother to put a dress on me. I said my mother was in bed and might not be up for a couple of

months. I had one green dress I went to school in, about that time. My ego was shattered. Teacher asked me if I wore my only dress. I replied with no hesitation: "No, many, all the same, six of them."

I was left back in 1A. I remember a tall girl called Charlotte, who used to scratch me till I bled. She had been in 1A with my sister, who was seven years older than I. Being put back is the same as having the word *stupid* stamped on one's forehead. I used to sign my mother's name to report cards. After the first grade I became an avid reader.

Our kitchen was a huge room, it had a small bathroom. I thought of the bathroom as my prison — very high walls. The kitchen had an upright piano with hundreds of pieces of popular sheet music on top of it. I used to stick coins between the keys. My father chopped it up with an axe to get the money out of the piano. My mother had a huge galvanized washtub. My father threw it out; he did not want to see her work so hard, probably the only thing he ever threw out, but she bought another one.

I would sit on a large chair with my feet on the rungs, trying to hold my breath long enough to stop breathing — but it did not work.

I used to pray for months at a time for a younger brother, but no prayers were answered. I heard that God was a jealous God, and I prayed with the stipulation that whichever God he was, if he would give me a bicycle I would follow him. No bicycle.

I was what was known in those days as a tomboy. I told my friend Clifford O'Day that he may be thinking I was Ruth, but really I was a Prince. It was not difficult to convince him, because I was already convinced.

I was an avid marble player. The boys and I had cleared the snow away one evening and we were busy playing. A woman was shocked when someone called me by my name.

I used to go swimming in Sea Gate with some boy who used to call me feller. I would wear a heavy sweater over my suit and throw it on the sand, then run in the water. But how long could one get away with it?

I remember one day being on a swing in Sea Gate. There were young men and women calling up asking if I were a boy or girl. I felt terribly humiliated. There was a horribly humiliating occasion on a subway train. A young man and woman were asking me questions that were markedly sexual. I wanted to die. I could never accept

my body and its physical functions. I once heard my father tell my sister he did not need her body in the store, just her mind. I tried to visualize her mind going in the store without her body.

My father was a short tyrant, he could not take his wrath out on anyone besides his children. I would be punished for any infraction of his law. To this day if I say no to anyone I think I am going to get the axe. There has been very little tenderness or caring in my life, and if shown any I just fall apart. It is the human quality that most touches me. I have seen animals able to give it to their young, and other than their own.

I sought this quality from my family, they were unable to give it. I would attempt to make a family of other people, other than my family. I would try to get it from people who, like my family, were incapable of giving it.

I want to tell you about Miss Goldstein. I remember her grey spats and raccoon coat. I would come into the school yard on Boys Day and try to get her attention by my negative methods. Oh, dear Miss Goldstein, how impressed I was by your grey spats! Then there was the gym teacher with beautiful eyes . . .

There was a florist in my neighborhood with hothouses and the most beautiful flowers. It was near the cemetery, quite deserted. Mary's brother Johnny told me he would get me a bunch of flowers if I would touch it. I came home at five years of age with a large bunch of flowers. I lived with my sin, and was somewhat relieved when I heard Johnny died, hoping he took my sin with him. Thinking until my fortieth year that I was a prostitute, I finally let go of my sin.

My mother suffered with melancholia, she would stay in bed months at a time, exclaiming she wanted to die. There was no way I could outdo my mother. I was the youngest, stuck with the care of my mother.

My father jumped up and down with rage at an innocent remark of mine. I consider everyone in my family crazy. One does not have to be a psychiatrist to come to that conclusion.

I am nineteen and discover the Village. It felt like huge magnets coming up from sidewalks. I would pass a bar and get intoxicated just by passing it. I passed a young woman dressed in a very masculine fashion. I followed her into a gay night club. Two women danced to the accompaniment of "Violets, Who Will Buy My Vio-

lets." I was thrilled watching them. Music, dancing, women paradise. It did not take too long to discover this was not the Garden of Eden.

My ^{sister-in-law} practically held my hand while I signed my way into the army — to be precise the Women's Army Corps.

I waited patiently while the psychiatrist paced up and down. When he asked me what author I liked, it was Millen Brand, who wrote *The Outward Room*, about a young woman escaping from a mental hospital. I really should have said *True Story Magazine*.

We had a very nice Captain who went overseas. She looked very much like me. She called: "Goodbye, Brooklyn." I was shocked that she remembered me.

I went into the office and asked to go overseas. It was really my reason for joining. The WAC Captain said: "You have nice eyes." I thought I should say the same, but could not manage it. We went to a dance. The men stood on one side of the room, the women on the other. The WAC Captain came in and danced with the men. I got drunk, crying I should never have joined the service. I remember other WACs were very comforting. I felt they understood.

One day I was on the lawn with Luz, we were wrestling. She told me to meet her in the coal shed. I did not feel inclined to.

We were called out for airplane identification about six o'clock in the morning. It was in a long dark barracks. Luz sat next to me. She took my hand and put it in her pocket; Luz had cut the pockets out of her pants. I thought, Good Lord, if I get kicked out of the army for doing something I don't want to do, it will be awful.

We all were shipped to New Guinea, seventeen days on a ship, no fresh water to drink or wash with . . . and Luz.

If we went off the base, we had to be in the company of a soldier with a gun. This always struck me as being most peculiar.

There was nothing to do in the night except go to the movies or make love with the opposite sex.

One night while we were sitting on blankets in the sand, I moved closer to two young women. They gave me such a withering glance, I quickly moved away, crestfallen.

There were two young women from the Red Cross. I thought they might be gay, and immediately fell in love with one. At night I fantasized getting a jeep and going to her. At that point I would not vouch for my sanity. I did not know how to drive, nor knew where she was, or whether I would be as welcome as a snake.

I was paralyzed with fear of getting discharged from the WACs. I managed to get fired from every inconsequential job I ever had. One more blow to my ego would be shattering.

I was very depressed. Some WACs introduced me to a soldier — he was a comedian, I was also. I had a rash commonly known as jungle rot. He was nice, very understanding. He visited me in the hospital, and was not put off by jungle rot.

We would sit outdoors and watch movies, with me scratching shamelessly. He knew he could not rid me of my depression.

I met an Australian soldier I liked, he never made a pass. We played ping pong, while other WACs were having blanket parties. I was playing with the idea of marrying him, and maybe I could go straight and live in Australia. Dream on.

They were sending me home on account of the jungle rot. A deep depression ensued, to be going back to the Hell I left. The environment I lived in made me a candidate for a psychiatrist, and that is where I wound up. Being a survivor, I'm still around, cracking jokes, writing poems, and this is my first narrative.

Buddies

Corey leaning against my locker — no pants to protect me now, just thighs glistening cold cream and the tee-shirt damp from the shower. New wetness creeps in under my arms, dribbles between my breasts and throbs anew from the heart atop my thighs. I dodge her look and let a haze drift in to film my eyes.

“What for?”

She insists with questions. She means to say: I don't want you to go.

“I need to find something out. For me.”

“You don't have to hang with them. Let's get something to eat and then go home — your place.” Her smile — African sweet with a stop-off in Jamaica for mangoes and banana — knows honey catches more flies than vinegar.

“C'mon Boo. This is silly.”

Almost persuaded, I remain stubborn. She's right. No need to seek answers in a bar when Life is handing me the next question. I'd like to pass on this dance. Corey blocking an exit frames the open door if I can find the courage to take on the step.

I consider wrestling across her to my clothes and circling around my nakedness. Nothing new to that play — and it'd prop me with a pose, contain my hands, mask what my eyes might tell before I'm ready with words. We're touchy-feely friends, not sissy-girl style, but buddy-type hands-on. I want to break the tension and shift us to another plane. Too much danger plays in this arena. The truth I hold captive must live for her too, but if Corey turns to salt, who can ever again slake my tears?

Other people manage to talk to each other, to deliberately weave out shared tapestries. How to make a change in our pattern? It'd be so simple to put out: I want you and if I can't have you, I'll find someone else — and it's going to be a woman.

I throw up a lie, still draped in a fear without textures I can touch and then reason through to undisguised acts.

“You my ace, right? But tonight I’m hanging with the girls — that is, if you let me get even halfway dressed.”

She doesn’t let up for any play. This ground is so shaky, I just don’t know my way around. Usually she takes the bully stance when it’s clear we’re both agreed. I dug how she handled the dealings to make us always a pair. Our friends still say, “You can’t have one without the other.”

We don’t speak about caring — it’s just there, unmentionable. Like when I took that fall today. From street ball, I’m pretty much used to going for myself, but Corey’s taught me there’s also glory in sharing. I’d sent her the pass when my left foot unhinged a great show of team work. She threw the ball away, leaving her fast-break lay-up, helped me down court and cradled me from the others. I couldn’t forbid the tears, protesting to the high heavens against the injustice of another sprain. When I got up from nothing too much more than strained pride — I’d tripped over my own two feet — she kissed my forehead with everyone watching.

I want to hold her for real — not just on the occasion of accidents or horseplay. I want to touch from an upfront connection that’s clearcut and not disguised, yet I hold back, afraid to speak words that ask plainly.

And now, she doesn’t budge from her track — no sign that she scouts the path that’d let us both run free. I know my May-born bull, but something else shifts inside that she’s not telling. I stay in hiding, too; tease with the truth, careful not to land too close.

“Hey, I always come back to you.”

No reply: doubt marks the bad girl of Brooklyn. I search her eyes on this round, allowing space for her move. Two of my fingers trace her lips, a necklace line, then surprise me at the buttons on her shirt.

Her kiss surprises me much more. Life becomes right in small pieces that fit themselves together when I can’t manage the moves. Clean tastes live in her mouth — they’re fresh and warm as I explore the new land she’s opened to me.

“BJ. This is just about you and me. I’m not that way, but I . . .”

“Barbara Jean — you ready girl?”

I buckle against the interruption. We take it in and move apart

carefully. Corey hands me the pants, has buttoned up when Sharon reaches our aisle. I still shudder inside.

“So what’s the word, girly?”

“I’m, uh, not . . .”

“We’re coming. BJ has to finish dressing. How far away’s this bar?”

“All right Corey! I was really hoping you’d break down and come. It’s just through the park and down two blocks.”

Walking through the park, the group of us fill the air with laughter and unconquered spirit. Finals are over. May green looks like full-grown summer. I hang quiet by Corey; Sharon, Jess, and Kath argue about the game we lost to City.

“I don’t care what you say, bitch. I was beautiful. My magnificent left hand worked wonders.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t look good, girlfriend. I’m saying we lost the game because so many of us had such good-looking moments. Posing all alone. Leaving the team behind. You know what I’m saying?”

I half-listen. They stop to light up some herb. I don’t smoke, but Sharon always passes to me. Corey motions for me to shotgun and while she holds the belt loops at my waist, I wonder what the others think about what we are to each other.

If anyone calls Sharon, Jess, or Kath gay, they’ll shake your hand and say thank-you, just like if you point out they’re Black. I’m not that bold. I’ve started talking about maybe being bi, but that’s just a cover from people jumping too hard on my head.

They finish up the joint as we near the west edge of the park. Corey’s leaning on my shoulder, counting stars. I nudge her to brace up for trouble heading our way: the hustler coming towards us looks totally off the wall. The other guys had just called out their wares and let us pass on through when no one was buying, but this fella isn’t picking up on vibes. He’s giving the once-over like we’re supposed to drop everything and pay homage to him.

“Young ladies. Hold up a minute there, y’all. I got something for ya.”

For such a puny-looking guy, he sure was bold about latching onto Corey’s arm. In all fairness, I suppose, he couldn’t know she wasn’t a friendly type who’d welcome strange men she didn’t invite onto her bodily parts. Corey’s one of those baby-sweetfaced children, but she is still a strong-looking heifer. Muscles show up loud and clear when she wears a coat and flaming gold plums twinkled

from her arms and shoulders under the tee shirt she wore now. The build alone would measure off most people's distance, and her mouth has killed a lot of bricks.

"Get the fuck off me before I kick your motherfucking teeth in, fool."

"Oh wow, you a big tough bionic woman — but you ain't no man yet, baby. Lookee here, y'all . . ."

"You better chill out, dude."

"I got something right here to make you change up off that bull-dagger shit, momma."

I'm almost glad it turned out the dude could run. Corey laid him flat on his butt and I'd moved in behind to jump hard on his case. She suffers from a temperamental nature and I've often had to make up for slack in her thought tone, but my girl is swift behind feeling. As far as the guy was concerned, it wasn't him personally, so I really would've felt bad getting my shit off on his ass for all the dudes who felt they had the right to just impose themselves when they scope on a woman without a man. This one had instinctive good sense about high-tailing it out to the fountain right quick. He probably didn't even notice the bunch of us readying to get down.

"I'll say one thing for you Corey; with you around, nobody has to worry about being insulted."

"Yeah, with me and my temper, you will be respected. Or else dead."

Inside the bar, touches we'd ordinarily give lie stilled and left behind. No arm cradles my neck, no playful hand rests in my back pocket, no lap pulls me to sit down. She leans against a wall, her body cut off from me, no more to circle the fond and sweet trails of fire up my back now that we're in this place where women do touch openly and speak desire out loud. Struck suddenly shy, both of us have turned strangers to each other. Yet these women look like us, as if we'd all been dropped from trees of the same dense forest.

The fast records have played out and some women choose one another for the slow ones. I think how nice it'd be to hold her, to rock on Smokey's "Ooh, baby, baby." I want to so bad, what makes it so hard to ask? There's nothing I could lose: stepping on new land yields more ground for the two of us to cover.

"Dance?"

Her look begs off and would forbid, but I coax, then insist. She

consents with a frown unsure and not far from shame, but she comes along. We don't stop after Smokey, continue into the Stylistics' "La la means I love you."

I guide her around my center like a lullabye, kiss her forehead as earlier she'd reached out for me. I find her neck, her cheek. Her mouth is mine to open and I dip in, searching. I don't care who sees us. This is my dance and I don't let her pull away. I hold the woman I've asked, keeping her close. I hold to the one who's been in my corner, who goes where I lead, and yes, I've doubted, but now I know: who'll stand by me and stay.

For C.V.

Thirteen white hairs over your left eyebrow.
We are watching for your mother's streak,
for time to bring a blaze of frost
across your hair.

I plan to see it spread
all through that fierce and curling mass.
We wait. I see us on a front porch,
knitting and mending, reading the novels
our friends have written.

When you tire, you can lie
for as long as you like with your head
in my lap. I'll read all the good bits
aloud to you. You'll tell me just
exactly what you think. And then
you'll fall asleep with my left hand
tangled in your white hair,

my dear.

We Were Fired: Lesbian Experiences in Academe

written by Judith McDaniel from accounts by
Jeffner Allen, Judith Barrington, Peg Cruikshank,
Lois Helmbold, Melanie Kaye, Judith McDaniel,
and Julie Murphy.

with special thanks to Maureen Brady and to each of the lovers/ special friends of fired lesbians, with whom we shared our stress and pain, without whom we would have more seriously doubted our sanity and self-worth.

dedicated to all lesbians who have been fired for who they are, especially to those women who cannot yet write their stories for publication

At the opening session of the annual National Women's Studies Association convention held in June 1981 at Storrs, Connecticut, I announced a meeting of a "Fired Lesbians Caucus." There was some astonishment from the audience, some laughter, and scattered applause. Ten women came to the first caucus meeting. We sat in a circle and began to tell one another our stories . . . all painful stories, angering and wounding tales of betrayal, of the loss of our jobs, our incomes, our careers, our senses of self-esteem and competence. And we began to feel better. We began to know, each of us, that we were not crazy. We began to hear, some of us for the first time in months and months, a confirmation of our own reality. "Two things in particular struck me from our meetings in Connecticut," wrote one caucus member, "how we all needed to acknowledge to ourselves the reason we got fired was because we are dykes, and how we all told each other that we are good teachers." We sat in that room in a circle and we cried; we heard the hesitance and loss in each other's voices when we could barely speak to tell our stories; we heard the sarcasm and self-irony that is the humor of survivors; and we confirmed one another's anger. At the end of several hours, I knew that every woman in that room was an excellent teacher, a powerful, strong, influencing personality in the classroom and in the department. I felt, for the first time in months, that — in an academic setting — I was in the presence of my peers.

We found during our conversations that many of us experienced similar phenomena. We were drawing conclusions from these similarities that seemed to have significant political impact for lesbian/feminist analysis. After several meetings, just before the conference ended, we committed ourselves to writing about our experience of being fired. This article is an attempt to begin some of that work. Seven of us have written individual accounts from which I am drawing this article. Some of us need the protection of anonymity and therefore I have not specified which statement came from which participant in this project. Italicized quotations are from the personal accounts of fired lesbians, unless otherwise indicated. Some of us will be writing complete accounts of our own experience in academe for the special issue on Women and Education in *off our backs*.

The seven women who have chosen to write for this article come from diverse teaching situations. We taught at private, state, or religious colleges and universities. One of us was in college administration, while the rest of us taught philosophy, history, literature, and interdisciplinary women's studies. Some of us have Ph.D.s, some are working on them. Some of us were full-time employees, some part-time. But generally, this account is drawn from very similar perspectives. We are all professionally educated women between the ages of twenty-five and forty. We are all white. We are all self-defined and politically active lesbians. We all feel we were fired — at least in part — because of our lesbianism, but several of us feel that other factors also influenced our firing, including anti-Semitism and classism.

She Was NOT FIRED

[She] was NOT FIRED. Her contract with the University was what is called a fixed-term appointment. It was clearly spelled out in the contract which she signed with the University that her term of appointment was for the academic year 1980-1 only. [Her] persistence in claiming that she was fired reflects her desire to distort the facts for her own purposes.

(women's studies program administrator)

I didn't get a class for the fall. I call it fired. They don't have to say that, because part-time temporaries have no rights to future semesters. I found out I got fired by calling them; they didn't tell me. It was the last day of the semester, so no possibility for organizing anybody. I had taught here for eleven years.

They have never acknowledged the issue of my lesbianism, or my

politics. I can go to the National Women's Studies Association conference, and say I got fired for being a dyke and for my politics, but that isn't the way it is seen here.

It is clear to me that I was denied tenure because I was a lesbian. It is also clear to me that no one who voted to deny me tenure thought s/he was "discriminating" against me as a lesbian, but that each thought s/he was making "a difficult decision about the quality and direction" of my work.

"Am I now an 'official' fired lesbian?" asked one caucus member, after being "strongly suspected" of cheating on her Ph.D. exams (not accused of cheating, a charge against which she could have defended herself), harassed by professors who would not turn in her grades, harassed by a department of "scholars" who would not sit on her dissertation committee, and deprived of one of the two courses she teaches for her income. Sure. You've been fired. Or none of us has.

In fact, the only member of our caucus who was fired — in the traditional sense of that word — was the administrator. "Get out of the office," she was told, "before the end of the day." Workers in nearby offices helped her carry her books, papers, and plants to the car before the dean changed the locks on her office door, as he had threatened to do. The rest of us were "denied tenure," "not reappointed," or our contracts "expired." Others with more "seniority" — or clout — were given our courses. One woman taught an extremely successful course on "Heterosexism and the Oppression of Women." When she reapplied to teach it the following year, she was told that they were re-opening the hiring because she was not a qualified applicant for the job. The woman whose "fixed-term appointment" was allegedly for the "academic year 1980-1 only" had taught for three years at the same institution and was led to expect a regular full-time contract in the following year. "You weren't fired," the department secretary told one of us, "you were denied tenure. It's not like if they fired me." Yes . . . and no.

Teachers frequently have more control over their working conditions than other university employees. And if they attain tenure, their job security is enhanced in a way that other workers can seldom count on, even with the support of a union. A professor with a one-year contract has job security for that year; she probably could not be told to leave her office by the end of the day as the administrator was told. While acknowledging this level of privilege, we insist nonetheless that we have been denied our right to work.

Thus we must examine the realization each of us experienced: that we were *not* meant to think of ourselves as fired. What are the perceived differences between being fired from an administrative position, or a secretarial position, and being fired as a professor, whatever that action is called? Why would anyone, whatever his/her connection to the incident being described, perceive that in claiming to have been fired (instead of not reinstated) a woman desired "to distort the facts for her own purpose"? What can we gain by so "distorting" the facts? Why would they deny us our firing?

I Began To Struggle Against Feeling Crazy

Mostly my situation has been marked by silence. When I was hired I was told that tenure would be a "mere formality." I would only have to turn in a vitae, after teaching one more year, and there would be nothing to it, a "mere formality." After the year had passed, I went to one meeting about my tenure and then received a letter saying that the faculty had unanimously turned me down. They didn't talk to me much before the meeting, and they don't talk to me much now. In fact, some will not speak to me at all. Now, almost a year later, university appeals committees meet, and still no one tells me anything about what is being done to me.

My friend G. came to my office today. [She had been denied reappointment in another department.] She chatted in the hall with P., who was on the committee that denied me tenure. When I walked out, P. even said hello to me. I told G. as we were leaving, "Well, that's the first time she's spoken to me today," and G. said, "Oh, that's normal. My department always speaks to me when I'm with someone else."

And since the explanations they kept handing me were so flimsy, I kept arguing and asking. I was told by the coordinator that people from the east need to learn how they do things here [in the southwest]; that I might belong fine in other Women's Studies programs, but not this one. Now I have not lived in the east for fifteen years; but I am a Jew from Brooklyn and I certainly act like one. I mentioned this, and that lower-class Jews tend to come from the east. She said I was being ridiculous.

I think most of us have encountered silence or evasion about our firing because of others' fear of us. If the contract just expires, if we are victims of a budget cut, no one is to blame, no one will be required to say *why* we are fired. It is the self-protection of those in power. If they have made no decision, they cannot be shown to have been wrong. If we challenge their evasions, they can call us "ridiculous." And so some of us were smothered in silence, muffled

in a blanket of denial. *No, that was not how it was. No, you do not exist, are not important enough for us to have to deal with. You are not there.* The denial — of our firing and sometimes of our very existence — can be frightening. Each of us who experienced it felt the edge of that “craziness” and had to check our own sense of reality with friends we could still trust. While we could understand — at times — the impulses of those who avoided or denied us, could understand their discomfort or lack of awareness or understanding, being ignored in this way is so painful, we cannot forgive it.

A woman in my department who voted against my tenure avoided me for days after the decision, closing her office door, moving quickly down the halls. Finally I walked into her office to see if she/I still existed. She told me I was paranoid, she had not been avoiding me. Then she said, I didn't think you'd want to see me. I didn't. But I had to.

Equally devastating was the other tactic used against us, sometimes in conjunction with silence. When we were told why we were not “good enough,” why our work was “unsatisfactory,” we could seldom connect these reasons to our own reality. In these accounts of supervisors, administrators, chairpersons, and “peers,” good became bad, energy became hostility or aggression, openness was divisive.

The department claims that I am doing propaganda in the classroom. It seems they consider Simone de Beauvoir “propaganda” when taught in a contemporary human thought course. . . . The department faculty say a few things to me. They say I am schizophrenic because I do not “remember” doing propaganda in the classroom. I say I have not done propaganda in the classroom.

It also drove me crazy that my attackers were never upfront about the real reasons for trashing me.

For All Those Who Are Excluded for Some Difference

Not one woman in the Fired Lesbian Caucus was told she was fired for being different: for her sexual preference, or for being working class or Jewish, or for being too political. The ways in which we each came to understand our firing were so subtle that often our own perceptions were challenged by everyone around us. “I hope that we are all liberals here,” said a chairman, when confronted with the political and sexual preference identification of one lesbian. They were. No one ever denied her right to whatever sexual identification she chose; it was just that, well, as one colleague write, “I feel that even after years in the same department I

don't actually know [her] well. . . . She seems to wish mostly to ignore this ordinary collegial activity."

Ordinary collegial activity means fitting in, being the same as everyone else. For those of us who are different, or who have affirmed difference, ordinary collegial activity becomes an enormous roadblock to success. As lesbians, we cannot take an "ordinary" spouse to department functions, we cannot engage in "ordinary" office gossip and intrigues. Frequently our interest in our own disciplines is in no way "ordinary." Difference, that quality of the extraordinary, is two-edged. Both of the following statements were made about the same tenure candidate.

[She] has a heightened sympathy for all those who are excluded for some "difference" — be it physical impairment, sex, race or class and constantly reminds us through her own example and commitment of the great plurality and diversity that is the strength of society. . . . It is [she] who so frequently functions to make me measure my own capacity and to readjust and widen my lens whatever the literature or issue.

(untenured department member)

She is around campus very little, and seems to participate only in activities directly related to her special interests. This means that she shows no interest in most of her colleagues or in the work they do, and has no inclination to share her interests with most of us. Her allegiances seem unduly narrow, her absorption in her own individual projects a little excessive.

(tenured department member)

I believe that each of the observers was looking at the same "material," that is, the lesbian's function as outsider in a heterosexual community. In one instance, the observer is open to allowing a widened lens which includes the existence of those who are "different." In the other statement, the observer is clearly threatened by that difference, feels diminished that the lesbian "has no interest" in sharing with him; her interests are special, narrow, and excessive. His are normal and ought to be of concern to her.

I suspect that I unconsciously communicated to the dull young men placed over me my total indifference to them, which they may have interpreted as hostility. I was actually quite friendly to the straight men and the gay men who liked me, but the dullards assumed I was anti-male. They began saying I "couldn't get along with men." As soon as this albatross was hung around my neck, I was judged incompetent and expendable. A worker who cannot get along with men is a failure. Someday, I hope personnel files will tell which workers cannot get along with lesbians.

The necessity of "getting along with men" — however that is perceived — is especially and poignantly felt in academic women's studies programs. Since the inception of women's studies, lesbians have been active in shaping and nurturing these programs. Many of us have been able to make a commitment to our work, our students, and our colleagues in women's studies programs that we were not willing to make in traditional areas or disciplines. However, as university enrollment has faltered, as federal money for student loans and for university programs has diminished, we have watched a fundamental conflict in philosophy become a major split within some of our women's studies programs. Some would have us minimize our difference, find ways to become more "pleasing" to the institution, attempt to pass as "like them." Others believe we must build on our difference: create coalitions with other outsiders, integrate feminist political work in the community with feminist political study in the university.

The coordinator wanted us all to become more pleasing to the Institution.

You criticized a former women's studies teacher for not looking lady-like enough to please the dean. A hippie anthropologist who wore long skirts, ethnic clothes and no bra didn't make it with the dean. I bet you just loved my dyke garb. I didn't even wear my most butch clothes to school.

The women's studies programs from which caucus members were fired invariably had chosen the path of assimilation. Difference does exist. By failing to acknowledge difference, failing to build on the uniqueness of each woman's whole identity, I believe these programs are making themselves weaker, not making themselves more able to survive. And as a result of the denial of difference, women's studies in academe has on occasion become — not only viciously homophobic — but misogynist, racist, classist, and anti-Semitic.

This program had also refused several times to hire Paula Gunn Allen, a renowned poet with three or four books, a native of this area and of the Laguna Pueblo, author of an essay on Native American literature which immediately became a classic in the field ("The Sacred Hoop"), all kinds of honors, a Ph.D., etc., etc. Paula is also an open lesbian and believes that her politics, spirituality, and dykiness were the decisive factors.

Your anti-Semitism came out when you put obstacles in the way of a

Jewish women's class. You rejected a Black tenured Ph.D. to teach Sex and Race, when preferred university policy is to hire from within. She was a Black Ph.D. who called you "pink women." Your academic standards are useful to you only when they are the most convenient excuse.

My "style" bothered her.

Whenever someone undeniably different from other workers/members/participants is excluded/not hired/etc., the question of bias arises; be it sexism, heterosexism, racism, anti-Semitism, classism, etc. To our understanding [she] was the only Jewish teacher in the program . . . and the only instructor in the department who was completely open about being a lesbian. So her termination leads us to ask some questions about homophobia and anti-Semitism.

(Jewish Women's Support Group)

Questions about homophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, and classism are not welcome in these programs, sometimes less welcome than in the "liberal" male universities where small differences can be tolerated against the whole fabric of normalcy and stability. But another problem presents itself to the lesbian in the more "traditional" programs and disciplines. When her work is not exactly in line with the mainstream of her discipline, it becomes invisible, unacceptable, or unprofessional.

Extremely Unprofessional Behavior

A dissertation done by one of my students was said by the chairman to "shake all of his values." When he said that, I was even more convinced that the student's dissertation was a success.

Always when I read her I feel that she has not done justice to her natural intelligence, that she has been violated by her ideas.

Academic "standards" of quality and excellence are absolute. Allegedly, we all know what they are and we all strive to achieve them. Discourse consists of determining where any individual may have fallen short of "perfection." No one person or institution created these "standards," no one is responsible for them. We are all responsible to them. A male professor who has taught twentieth-century American literature for thirty years without mentioning a single woman writer has not violated these "standards." A female professor who chooses to focus her teaching and writing on women authors is in violation of them. Many of us have found that these "standards" mean our best strengths are never considered, that our "weaknesses" are far more important.

The department decided to make my teaching of creative writing the significant reason why I should not be kept. Several members of the committee visited my class. None came to more than two workshops, none came to a meeting of the entire creative writing class where I do critical vocabulary, literary structure, etc.; none came to my advanced poetry class. Generally, student evaluations of the courses were excellent — much better than just good or adequate — but they found the one or two by students who were dissatisfied to justify their opinion.

My students' evaluations of me . . . were very positive. When I mentioned this fact at a later meeting, the judgement of those students was minimized — how would they know? (Then why ask?)

For women's studies programs, achieving these "standards" becomes a painful and difficult problem. Most feminists understand that they are male standards, skewed, biased, unfair, and unobjective. Nevertheless, some would have women's studies try and measure up.

I despise the practice of describing human beings "objectively" by reducing them to a set of concrete attributes — degrees held, number of publications, numerical descriptions of teaching effectiveness. Epistemologically, I believe that we know much more when we allow ourselves to perceive subjectively, intuitively, holistically. Yet, when it comes to policy, I am reluctant to argue the latter position.

(women's studies coordinator)

[She] implies that academic legitimacy is a dirty word. On the contrary, it is high time that Feminist scholarship be given the academic respect and legitimacy that it deserves.

(women's studies program administrator)

Under these "standards," academic respectability will never be "given" to women's studies; and women's studies will never be able to earn legitimacy under "standards" which define themselves in male terms. Knowing this, nonetheless, some women's studies administrators find themselves unable to argue in favor of a feminist approach that would eliminate hierarchy, open the institution to the community, find legitimacy in experience and knowledge rather than in pieces of paper certifying credentials which may or may not exist. To so argue would then require that women's studies build its strength on difference rather than assimilation. It would require that women's studies consider itself "the outsider" along with the lesbian, rather than casting out lesbians in a futile attempt to assimilate. Lesbians have often expected such support, and we have often been disappointed and betrayed in our expectation.

When we have tried to create circumstances which were supportive to our own existence, we have been accused of unprofessional behavior.

Mary Jane Lupton has described one of the key components of "professionalism" as the distance that is required between teachers and students, and in this respect I certainly violated the required code of behavior. . . . My commitment [is] to developing a feminist teaching style that would decrease this distance, in an attempt to give students more power over their learning situation.

These instructors have impeded the work of the Program at all levels. They have lobbied students to their position and have attempted to influence members of the women's community to turn against the rest of the Program. . . . I must go on record expressing my conviction that the actions of the Instructors demonstrate extremely unprofessional behavior.

(women's studies program administrator)

If academic "standards" are absolute, if an individual does not meet them, even if that is a conscious political choice — or especially if that is a conscious choice — she is to blame for her own "failure." And in the eyes of those who have chosen to try and meet these "standards," we who have not are attacking them, impeding their work, and — ultimately — some of us have been accused not only of unprofessional behavior, but of disloyalty. The institution demands absolute loyalty on every point, every deviation creates vulnerability for us.

I thought, "A Jesuit school can't do this to me — I'm one of their own." A good girl, who had always obeyed, with a Ph.D. from Loyola, but a feminist and a dyke. I had not really been one of their own for many years, but I needed to cling to that shred of respectability, at least for a moment.

But they can do this to us, a realization each of us has encountered in the past year. They can and they will. The havoc wrought to our self-esteem is considerable, whatever the circumstances of being fired, of being found unsuitable, not good enough. But significantly, most of us were either fired by women who represented the "standards," or women were involved in our firing. For us, this created an incredibly painful dilemma.

Loyalty and Betrayal: "Listen to this, you bitches"

But it was not coming directly from the men. It was coming from a woman I had befriended the previous year.

Everyone involved was a woman who was committed, she said, to feminism. You can imagine the cynicism I am obliged to battle as a result of all this.

Finally, the other token woman of the department volunteered to read my abstract. She brought her two-year-old son to share my office appointment with us. After learning from her that she regards racism as biologically based, and doesn't think "women" are social types, I had her removed from my committee. She has since created problems for me about that action.

There has never been a tenured woman in the department, but there is another woman in the department, more "junior" in standing than me. . . . She makes gossip and rumor against me and against the students who study with me.

When I recited my history of involvement with the women's movement on this campus, she said, no, she didn't know. Didn't know? It's in my resume.

*. . . and I hear
my friend's voice, voice I have loved for years
with great reluctance and personal sorrow
no evidence of significant achievement
I remain interested but not fulfilling
the promise diminished great reluctance
. . . and I would choose this confusion
for here is a betrayal to last a lifetime.*

Day after day, I wished I could be fighting this battle against the Dean, or the Vice-President, or some other man, whose motives would be clear to me, and at whom I could clearly direct my fury and outrage. From them I would not expect anything better.

The concept of sisterhood, when vaguely expressed or poorly defined, would make feminism seem almost easy: We are all sisters, the enemy is out there. We know who he is and what his motives are. We know who we can count on for support in our struggle. It never *was* that simple for any of us, but there was a simple expectation: that women would understand our struggle even when they would not join it. When women professed to have joined, called themselves "feminists," and *then* showed by their actions that they were doing men's work in a man's profession, we were confused. Were we wrong? Had some important analysis slipped by us? Something these women knew that we had missed? If they were wrong—and we instinctively knew they were, even when we ques-

tioned ourselves—how could we challenge them without bringing down around all of our heads the small edifice we had been building? For each of us believes our work in women's studies is important.

We found no easy solutions to this problem. That we are fired testifies to our inability to find the suitable answers, and to the intransigence of those who have found their way into small bits of patriarchal power. What we are struggling for in the dialogue among ourselves is confirmation of the difficulty of what we have experienced and an affirmation of our right to our anger. For we are very angry. Some of us have been told our anger is "wrong," some have been told that our anger is itself the problem, but each of us knows that in our anger we have a key to that which oppresses us. Only when we fully express that anger can we heal.

I don't want to look at it, don't want to remember how bewildered and hurt I felt, how enraged, how I dreamt about it; the telling-off fantasies, the showing-up fantasies, again and again. . . . I don't want to think again how I was humiliated and how I am afraid even now women won't believe my story, will think I was really a poor teacher; afraid that the women who fired me will be in a position to define what really happened.

Word came to me through the women's studies group that my anger made me unsympathetic as a victim and they found it difficult to support me while I was so angry.

Then you said, at least five or six times, that you had always sensed hostility from me. Not hostility, but anger. Hostility dismisses me and my reality. Anger.

I would veer wildly from fury, as she attacked me for what I considered my strongest assets, to acute misery, as I understood her position as a victim herself.

Sometimes I think of getting back at them. . . . I am furious that they are using their power to limit what I can say and to take away from me my means of economic support.

I want to nail their hides to the wall.

I'm writing a novel entitled A Fatal Case of Tenure. The opening line is: "When I plunged the knife into his heart, I became completely sane for the first time in years." The main character is a dyke professor who occasionally cross-dresses: a shadowy figure in tweeds with leather elbow patches and a briar pipe wanders the halls, striking terror in the hearts of heterosexuals.

The letter I never mailed: Listen to this, you bitches.

We have found different ways of expressing and directing our anger. Some of us have appealed within the university and have cases pending. Some of us have fought and lost. Some of us chose not to fight this time, but to withdraw and redirect our energies. None of us has yet won reinstatement. But the struggle for confrontation and understanding has been important to all of us. One woman — who chose to confront within the university — charged the women's studies department with homophobia and anti-Semitism.

As I recall the first step of the grievance procedure, my spirits lift. It was a meeting between me, the coordinator, and the affirmative action officer. And since we could bring witnesses, I did: several dyke friends, a Jew, an Irish woman, a Native Alaskan, who all testified on my behalf; read the statement of the Jewish Women's Group and letters from supporters, including students; were completely uncompromising and supportive. I do recommend fighting on every level: there is nothing to lose.

We Were Fired

We were fired. To deny that we were is to deny our anger and to accept that we were "dismissed" for some minor flaw which we could correct if we would only try. What happened to us did not happen because our publications were weak, or in the wrong field, not because our students were unenthusiastic or our classes did not fill. We were not even fired for not being ordinary colleagues. We were fired for what we are, for what we say, for the work that we insist on doing, for the vision we hold of ourselves as political women.

In the last few years we have felt the hostility in the air thicken, become palpable, as conservative and reactionary views are reinforced and rewarded at every level of political, social, and economic existence. Those who once were afraid of being openly sexist, chauvinist, racist, etc., are now flaunting conservative, elitist, exclusionary views. "I'd debate that with you in front of the entire faculty, and I'd win," boasted one man when confronted by a female colleague about his sexist use of language. Sexism, like homophobia, is once again his prerogative. It is this climate that has made our firing possible, even likely. Soon they may say why we are being fired.

What we must remember in order to survive is that we cannot change our dress, or speech, or the focus of our academic interests in order to become acceptable. Hiding our anger will not save us. If we cannot be who we are and be acceptable, that is a political reality we must recognize and consider in every act of our day-to-day existence.

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Learning To Fish: Live Bait

You hand me a night crawler
from the bait box pull your own
long and active from the pellets
of moist soil. I watch you
stick the hook-point into the worm
inch it 'round the bottom barb. You ignore
the flailing head the squirming tail the gut ooze
that muddies your fingers.

Kids catch these at night you tell me.
After a rain with a bright moon they take
flashlights flash the ditchbank and grab.
You have to be fast with your hands
and pail. The worms are quick too
wiggle right back
into the wet dirt when the light hits them.

Street lights hit me. I ducked back into
shadow of poles squat signals in the railroad yard.

I was
small and a girl
so I was fast
a quick mouth
I lied to save pokey Sasha
in the yard
I swiped coal
from open box cars

The yard boss never caught me
his daughter went
to a different school
His flashlight hung from his belt
the nightstick too he wore it
carried the storm lamp
He grabbed old bo's asleep kids
shinnying up hiding running

He called us all night crawlers.

You bait them my father railed. You give them
excuse to call us hunkies gypsies thieves to say
your people lazy no work. Someday they break
your head break laws in new country break
my heart. My mother used the coal I stole
to cook soup burned it in the heater stove
near the room where we all slept.

You finish baiting your hook. I begin
with mine stop to remember some species
struggle alone. I expect blood gut trickle
the muscled twist of live bait. I'd fight too
to keep from dying.

We Are Not Always

We are not always the wise woman,
the stanch healer, the constant midwife,
the one who culls the herbs
into the magic poultice.

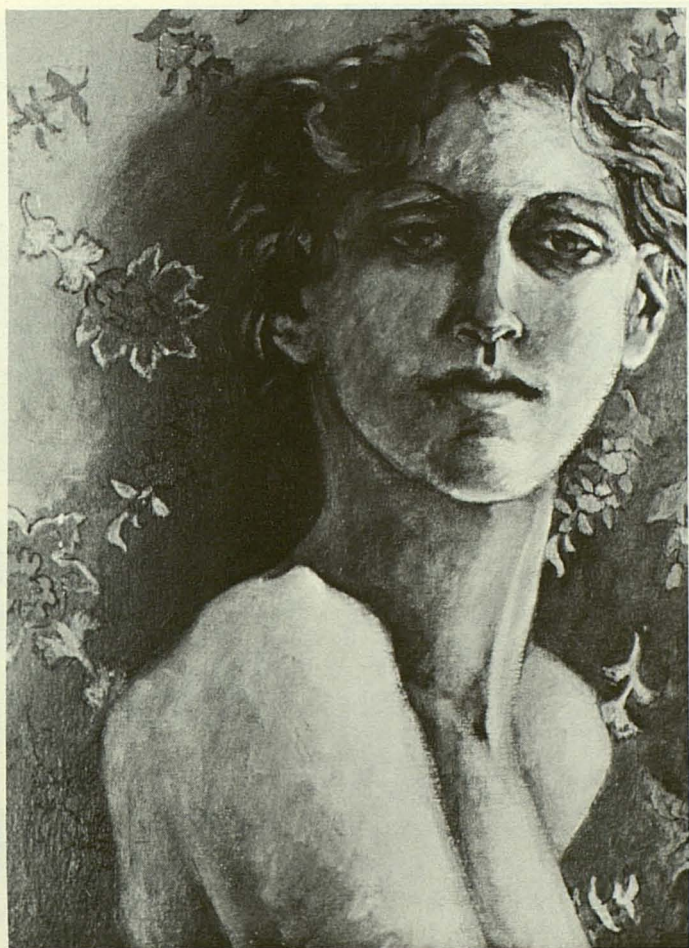
We are not always mother and daughter,
the strong hands, the nipple's sweetness,
the arms that rock and rock
and give when need demands it.

We are not always earth and water
nor two sheaves of wheat
nor shells wet with repetitious waves,
the salt rim fresh on the thin smooth lip.

Sometimes we are the spinsters
who turn the wheel, but do not spin,
the mother's nag, the daughter's wanton anger.
Sometimes you are the runaway river,

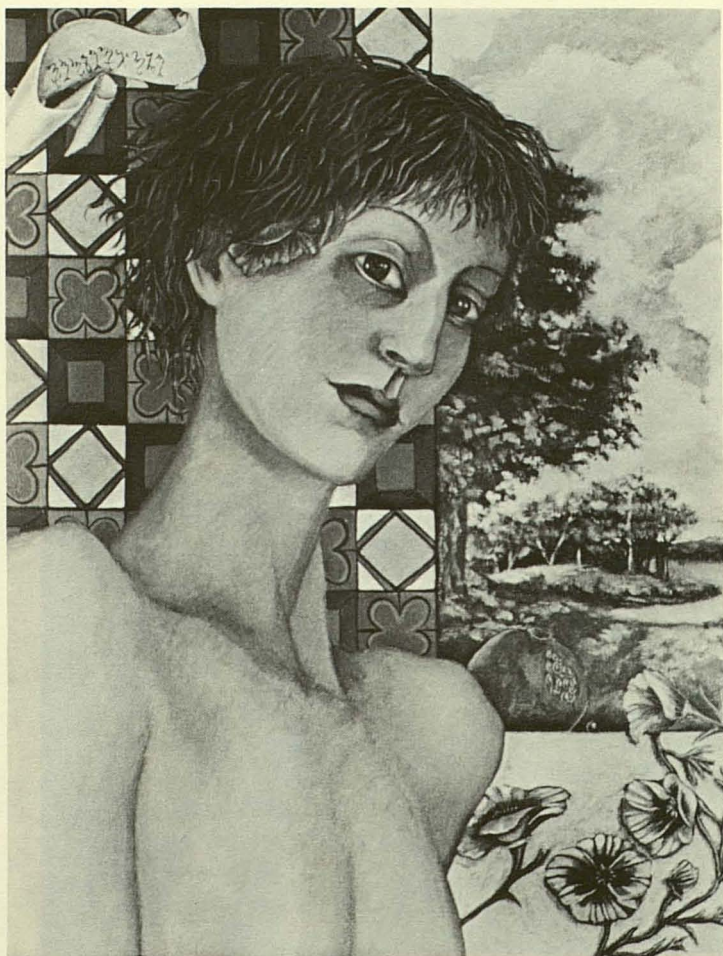
the river that threatens my field;
I am the wave that hurls its crest
like rocks
against your clapboard beach house.

Like atoms
we move,
owning weight, mass, momentum.
We are not always anything but ourselves.



"All Lesbian Mime Troupe on Tour: Samantha,"
1977, 18" x 12", oil

painting by Sudie Rakusin



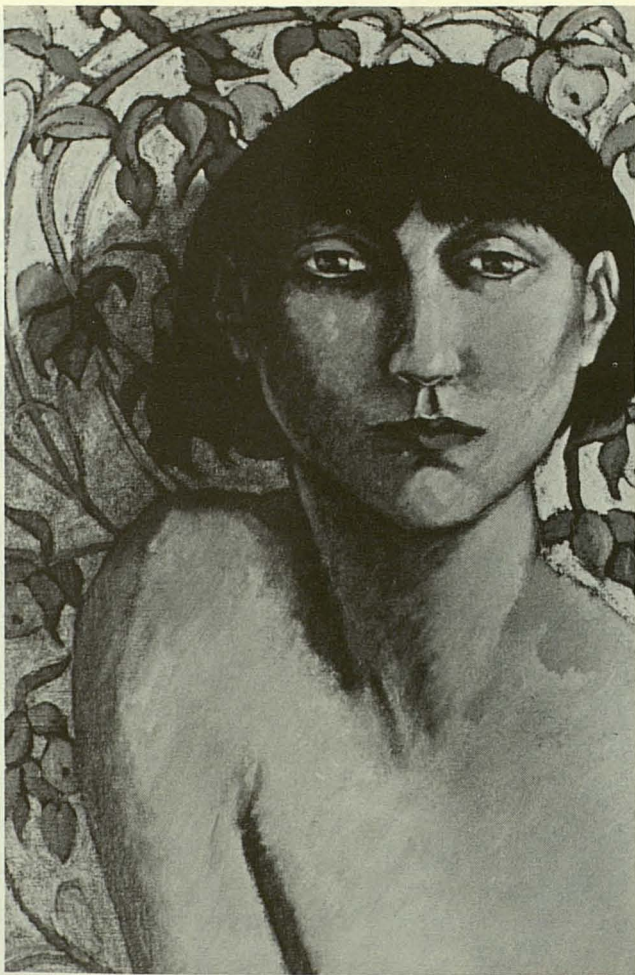
"Persephone,"
1978, 24" x 12", oil

painting by Sudie Rakusin



"Demeter,"
1978, 24" x 12", oil

painting by Sudie Rakusin



"All Lesbian Mime Troupe on Tour: Natalie,"
1977, 18" x 12", oil

painting by Sudie Rakusin

From the State Hospital

patient: bearing pains or trials
calmly or without complaint

screen: a shield for
secret
evil practices

remembering
the sacramental
confessional screen

... forgive me father
for I have sinned ...

what sins?
no matter
penance
the matter
punishment
the matter

sacred as a sign
as a symbol
of his spiritual reality
she became his
sacrificial beast
objected to holy,
religious, cursed rites

her flesh smelled of burnings
her bones spoke of beatings

sheets wrapped
round and round
sheets wrapped
 front
 round her breasts
 arms and legs
sheets wound back around her chair
her tongue
 rapping
 teeth
 proclaimed
 this egyptian queen
 was not ready to die

patient: steadfast
 despite
 opposition
 difficulty
 adversity

patient: one
who
is
acted
upon

madwoman

her tongue grew
fat and heavy
until
she could speak no more

she rubbed the sides
of her forehead
in a private ritual
trying to remember
who she had been
and
what she had done

her temples burned
remembering the shock
treatments

patient: forebear
under
provocation
or strain

during
community meetings
knitting needles
beat out
dayroom
chatter: knit one, perl two

razed arms
bloodletting
scars
trail up to her elbows

tattoo lightning energy
metamorph/sisters
become
companion serpents
ready
ready to strike back

psychiatrick #1

he comes from his fear
trying to capture her power
he calls it psychotherapy

... curing his dis/ease
by treating her spirit

she comes from the east
at the dawn of spring
from mountain peaks
to windy beaches

she is air deva

psychiatrick #2

he comes from his inadequacy
trying to burn out her power
he calls it electroshock therapy

... curing his dis/ease
by treating her spirit

she comes from the south
at the noon of summer
from desert to volcano
through flame and blood

she is fire deva

psychiatrick #3

he comes from his jealousy
trying to cut out her power
he calls it psychosurgery

... curing his dis/ease
by treating her spirit

she comes from the west
at the twilight of autumn
through springs & streams
through lakes & wells

she is water deva

psychiatrick #4

he comes from his ignorance
trying to restrain her power
he calls it drug therapy

... curing his dis/ease
by treating her spirit

she comes from the north
at the midnight of winter
through caves and fields
through rocks and stones

she is earth deva

— *Mary Moran*

death car ride

In the hotel halls of Zimbabwe
the floors are covered with black women's
tears
and who hears them fall
who hears the sound ricochet
from the floor?

We have signs that death
comes as the best reprieve
from a killing life.
I say that in Zimbabwe the women
pulled from the streets
pulled from the streets of Soweto
are taken to Zimbabwe
on the death car ride.

The hotel walls know the sound
of white fingers
sucking at life
in ebon skins.
In two days time there is little
left but scooped out shells.

It is said that women returning
from this
weekend spree of white men
I say
It is said:
after the last alabaster penis
leaves the brown thighs
the stolen women return home
on the round trip journey
of the death car ride.

The night bears witness
that the gutted forms
tear rough-hewn screams
from their lips
and the night bears witness and
the night echoes ricochets
of indigo tears.

Mother, as I thought I knew you

Flame orange hair with
black roots. Your coppered
flesh richness
made in neon,
a moving pulse of color.

What you did not know
who could say?
There were no
seams to your style.
Even your walk
set the pace of change.

— *Angela Wilson*

“if i speak too plainly . . .”

Melanie Kaye

A review of *Lesbian Lyrics* by Michiyo Cornell and *Medusa's Hair* by Elise Young. *Lesbian Lyrics* (1981), order from Michiyo Cornell, 76 George St., Burlington, VT 05401. \$3.00 postpaid. 22 pp. *Medusa's Hair* (1980), order from Mountainwind Products, Box 92, Middlefield, MA 01243. Also available from Diaspora Distribution. \$4.00 postpaid.

Lesbian Lyrics. I love the title, the picture of Michiyo Cornell on the cover, grinning, indisputably dykey. Commitment to women — mothers, daughters, third world sisters — animates this collection; but these poems are also about violation by men, betrayal by women, insufficient protection for children, and race-hate from whites. Michiyo Cornell's voice is brave, sometimes rageful, often deceptively calm as she speaks bitterness enough to break the heart. She is also one of several Japanese-American feminist poets to emerge in the last few years from “invisibility.”*

The book opens with the poet standing at her Japanese mother's grave, grieving; trying to explain her choice to love women. She looks across the generations, back and forth:

A teenage girl asked me
Why I became a Lesbian
I said I fell in love
With a woman
And that woman
Is myself, mother, mostly myself.

(“Mother”)

(Imagine hearing this when you were a teenager.) Mother-love, self-love and lesbian love reverberate through these poems, as does an intense optimism born of purpose: to fortify women and children with hard-won wisdom, so that pain is at least used.

At the same time, the poet writes to her daughter:

*See “Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman,” by Mitsuye Yamada, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds., Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Persephone Press, 1981).

I want to keep pain from you,
But you defy me:
Trying to stand,
Falling/hurting,
One day, you will walk.

(“Mayumi Sue”)

The mother knows, some of the pain must be lived through; only in this way is autonomy assured. The theme of wanting/not being able to protect children appears in many guises: in “Stella,” the poet depicts a child custody court decision made in accordance with patriarchal privilege; in “Speaking Bitterness” — but this poem should be quoted in full:

I tremble
On the shorelines of terror,
Believing
That someday
Someone will decide
They do not wish
To hear me
Speak of the need for change.
I will be dead.
Then, my daughter,
Who will love you?

In China before liberation, to “speak bitterness” was to tell, with appropriate anger, the story of your oppression, an essential step in coming to consciousness. In China today (or at least seven years ago, when I visited), old people still speak bitterness about their past, in order to educate the children. Michiyo Cornell evokes this context of revolution and parenting. In speaking truth — which is bitter — Michiyo Cornell opens possibilities for the self, for her daughter, for change; yet paradoxically (as is always true of revolutionary activity) she risks her life doing it. For the mother who knows her child’s safety and nurture depend entirely on her, this risk acquires a special poignancy; for the child’s future world also depends partly on the mother’s willingness to risk.

Similarly, in “Poetry Class/UMass/Amherst,” Michiyo Cornell writes of the danger of speaking “too plainly, too clearly.” In addition to being afraid that she’ll be attacked for telling truths, she also — like most of us who write, especially about our own experience — is afraid of being mocked. Yet she never, in these poems, considers not speaking.

If her own words are risky, other people’s words can be feeble or cruel, as in:

A Word to the Wise

I should have listened

To my girlfriends,

But I didn't understand

Why I should not

Walk them home.

Not until I saw the spray-painted,

Tarred hill behind the medical center

"Jap and Tony, Jap and Eddie,

Jap and . . ." just about

Every boy in our class.

It wasn't so hard

To figure out Jap was me.

There was no one else

Japanese

In our class.

I step back from the slightly ironic tone with which the poet has survived this experience and see the little girl reading the graffiti. *the shame*. the girlfriends who tried to protect and could not. the Japanese girl humiliated by white boys.

"it's that intimate, / sexism / racism," she writes in "Vow," one of the poems in which rage is expressed openly. Speaking to white women, she accuses them of hypocrisy, of clinging to the cultural baggage of racism. Specifically she calls for a redefinition of "white":

. . . in private

you speak of white

as the color of purity/strength.

the ku klux klan

wears white.

white is the Asian color

of mourning.

to me,

it means terror and death.

Any people piecing together a tradition amidst a welter of images from the dominant culture must redefine the key names; a hard look at color has been central to the work of many third world women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Andrea Canaan, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga,^o just to name a few.

^oI am thinking, in this order, of *The Woman Warrior*; *The Bluest Eye*; "Brownness," in *This Bridge Called My Back*; many of the poems in *The Black Unicorn*; and the preface and *passim* in *This Bridge* (in fact, *Bridge* is a mine, here as elsewhere).

Michiyo Cornell places herself firmly in this tradition. Moreover, she warns white women

if you betray me again,
my rage and grief
will know no end
and you will be —
i swear it on my mother's grave —
you will be dead by my hand.

We remember her mother's grave; this oath goes back generations of Japanese women, and there is no more time to absorb failure. She gives warning, depicts clearly an earned impatience; and the edge at which white women teeter, in danger of irrevocably destroying the possibility of trust with women of color. The hopeful note is that in Michiyo Cornell's world, solidarity among women is possible; now white women have to nurture this trust.

It's that intimate, sexism/racism. She writes of the white father who tried to rape her; graphically of the family friend who did rape her, and of her father's words which the poet says

I will never to my dying day
Forget,
"You have to understand
He's my drinking buddy."

("John")

I'll never forget these words either.

In "John," a direct statement of what happened *is* the poem. In "Vigil" too, written for the (then) six Black women murdered in Boston: "Their crime: / They were women, / They were Black." Along with Michiyo Cornell's work I've been reading Carolyn Forché's excruciatingly vivid report on El Salvador in which among other things she mentions the problem of metaphor in dealing with horror and cites Neruda: "the blood of the children / flowed out onto the streets / like . . . like the blood of the children."^o Here no attempt at metaphor: just horror, straight. They were women, they were Black. He's my drinking buddy.

In the specifics of the poet's experience archetypes of women's experience are revealed: in the poems, "My Rape," "My Abortion"; as if, everyone has her rape, and this is mine; everyone has her abortion, and this is mine. These two poems set the scene for the

^oCarolyn Forché, "El Salvador: An Aide Memoire," in the *American Poetry Review*, vol. 10, no. 4, July-August 1981, pp. 3-8.

fantasy violence in "The Rapist," and I think it is many women's fantasy too (I know it's mine): beginning with searing rage, Michiyo Cornell describes in detail tying down the rapist and castrating him ("Your white face will go whiter" setting her revenge apart from castration-as-terrorism against Black southern men); rhythmically, inexorably the poem builds to a compelling complexity: she tells the rapist, then — castrated —

You will know
The price of raping a woman
And your manhood may begin or die.

("The Rapist")

The possibility of manhood for the rapist exists only after he can no longer be "a man."* Michiyo Cornell is the first feminist I know to look past an imagined castration to what it might mean.

For women there is hope in these poems, that we will build trust with each other this side of death. For me, a Jewish woman, these poems are also a deep sharing, a window into the poet's consciousness: useful, informative, heartening, memorable, artfully simple. There are more stories in this poet and if she were sitting across the table from me, I'd be asking, so then what happened? what was it like? tell me more. MORE. I have no doubt that Michiyo Cornell will tell more. I am especially interested in her experience as a mixed-race child of Asian-American parentage, an experience which Michiyo Cornell's knife-life vision and clear brave voice can do much to articulate.† Meanwhile the poems she has written in *Lesbian Lyrics* continue to resonate in my brain.



Michiyo Cornell writes of the risks of speaking "too plainly." Elise Young, a Jewish lesbian whose language is far more elaborate than the spare utterances of *Lesbian Lyrics*, nevertheless confronts similar issues of poetic taboo (which are never "just" literary issues):

*Reminds me of Andrea Dworkin's demand for non-phallic sexuality in *Woman Hating*.

† Beginning with the Second World War, many Asian women have raised children fathered by American men; especially Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai women; women in all those places where the American military has waged war in the usual fashion with the usual integral rape and sexual exploitation, as well as personal and/or marital relationships between Asian women and American men, overseas and in the U.S. The experience of these children, many of whom are now adolescents and adults, has yet to be explored.

There are those who will cringe
to see the word "Jew"
in a poem.

("From Yanovitch to Young")

Both these poets recognize that what they say will sometimes have to be said against a poetic tradition which includes emblems of Christ and assumes white is pure; but excludes women, lesbians, Japanese, Jews. We have to invent a poetry in which we can speak. *Jew*. Even saying our names breaks rules.

The poems in *Medusa's Hair: Poetry of Lesbian Re-Envisioning* are about kinship, twinship, poems for her family women, women of the Jewish tribe, the lesbian tribe. The book opens on a characteristically gutsy note; "Awakening" tangles whiteness, racism, and sexuality for the white (Jewish) girl child:

Perfectly white
She must be:
Still, fleeting
an even purer mountain of snow in the Alps,
she must be cold to the touch, hot in her
acquiescence.
There and not there.

She must arise and walk to the door
of her fantasies of Black peoples
(lies that were told to her, lies that she invented)
and she must pound
down the door that does not open
and she must
pound down the door that does not open.

The urgency accumulates; though the door does not in this volume cave in, Elise Young is courageous in acknowledging that the door exists; and in beginning the work of breaking it down (work Michiyo Cornell, among others, asks of white women): to dissect and recreate meanings of dark and light.^o

Elise Young does not, like Michiyo Cornell, evoke a sense of unprotectedness; her language reveals rather an amplitude; sometimes, suffocation. In many of these poems she wanders through images of illness, decay, choking, before reaching, typically, a triumphant end. In "From Yanovitch to Young," invoking the legacy of her Jewish family women, she equips herself to assert:

^oCatherine Risingflame Moirai's poem "Taking Back My Night" bears mention here as an especially moving study of images of dark and light; in *Sinister Wisdom* 17 (1981).

... I ... daughter of a descendant who no longer dares to know; who, where, and why? Who tells our Jewish names as though it were a lie, misremembered and unheld; and no-one will know how to spell it, you'll be better off with Young than Yanovitch; who would have me called "son of" — I, who go back proudly further even than the Russian Steppes but ever knowing each step of the way that I have nothing of which to be ashamed.

The rhythm and cadence of these poems are nothing to be ashamed of either.

The poem's title speaks directly to the experience of the (at least) American Jew. Mine: from Kantrowitz to Kaye. I want every Jewish woman to write her "from P—— to P—," "from C—— to C—"; talk about renaming! As Jews we don't even know how to find our "real names"^o and if we, as many feminists have done, take names unmarked by patriarchy — Blossom, Marie-child, River — then in this dominant christian culture, we lose the Jewish from our names. At least names like Young, Kaye are code to other Jews.

The poems about Jewish experience and antisemitism weigh heavily in this collection, by volume and, for me, by impact. The Jewish lesbian, like any lesbian of the non-dominant people, finds herself caught, in love with and for women, needy of the lesbian community as a double outsider; but often she feels betrayed:

I wonder why my friends
who think that it is "understandable"
why some learned to hate Jews who
have money, do not know that hating
people of wealth
is not the same
as hating people who are Jewish.

("From Yanovitch to Young")

I wonder too why people, including committed lesbian feminists, so readily focus on Jews with money, denying the long history of Jewish poverty and labor struggles.

I value in Elise Young's poetry that she gives freely of her experience so that no one (of good will) can generalize inappropriately.

^oTraditionally, Jews didn't use patronyms (last names, carried through the male), but were distinguished in common sense ways, by nicknames, occupation, address, or spouse. Jews were forced to take patronyms throughout most of Europe during the nineteenth century.

When she writes, for example, in "A Litany of Jewish Exorcism,"

I am sick no-one notices
as when I crept out of the upper class wasp enclave for debutantes
hunched in the back seat of the car the pit of my stomach
crusted with anxiety.
Fear of being late Fear of being told I am different
too tall too unhappy too afraid too clumsy
too questioning not questioning enough

she speaks clearly from the perspective of the well-to-do Jewish girl raised to assimilate. When she admits, a few lines later, painfully

and so I have a need
to end
the Jewish
problem/cut it out of my body/let it out/let it go

she underscores the history of this need; for the positive side of growing up in a ghetto among your own people is that assimilation is not an issue: who you are is normal.

Her dream of capture and terror, on the other hand, might be mine: it is the Jewish dream, money or no money.

I dreamt that I was with a group of Jewish people. Many were disappearing
not coming back — and those of us who were left began to worry
that
it was the Nazis getting them. I remember standing in a huge hall
in front of some large windows and realizing I had to leave and
trying
to persuade the others to escape with me . . .

("A Litany . . .")

I have been quoting from "A Litany of Jewish Exorcism," the final poem in the volume and the most ambitious, long, and complex. The poem begins "Jew / Jew/Jew/Jew/ the Jew / the Jewish/ Problem." Those who cringe to see the word "Jew" in a poem are in trouble here; not only had they better get done cringing, but they will have to acknowledge that their attitude leads straight to concepts like "the Jewish Problem." Historical incidences of antisemitism, experience, stereotypes of Jews all interweave with scenes of classic Jewish "paranoia" (in quotes because the gentiles *are* after us). Images of decay-fever-mucous mingle with images of lust connected to class- and race-hate (here, antisemitism: Jew as scapegoat as ever). The wariness of the Jew in a gentile world rings exhaustingly true:

Always on the defensive. Always having to protect
what could not protect me.

Yet she is determined to join with, not separate from:

We have met in the graveyard.
We have met in the ditch. We have met on the podium.
We have met on the stool.
The Jewish problem is a consequence of being anything other
than white christian male heterosexual.

The poem concludes with the poet as one of a coven of lesbians who purge the synagogue and smash "[the] shrunken idols." Like Michiyo Cornell, Elise Young looks to women for her unity. (Unlike Michiyo Cornell, her rage at race-hate has not yet reached the breaking point.)

In another poem, Elise Young suggests that lesbians can name ourselves a people. She entices us with our own name:

... the word Jew and yours German
inscribed somewhere inside a place made uninhabitable by men
for you or I to dwell in, the hell of millions of slaughtered and
Lesbian blood dripping where we do not hide
our legs open and heat
pouring through our veins windland shakes the flowers whispering
windland shakes the flowers whispering
Lesbian, Lesbians name yourselves
windland shakes the flowers
whispering
Lesbian

("On Re-Naming")

In this passage, she joins the Holocaust, menstruation, and women's passion for each other, envisioning a pathetic fallacy where the whole landscape speaks the once-taboo word. I love the flamboyance of Jewish dykes.

But Elise Young does not pretend away the doors which will not open. If she has not yet pounded them down, she reveals her need to do so: authentic, prompted not by guilt but by intense connectedness:

Unleash one anger in me and you unleash them all.

("A Litany . . .")

This connectedness, at its most intimate, is love for another woman's "willingness not to die for me / but to survive" ("The First Separation"). Ever since Sylvia Plath died for nothing, women

poets have needed to value survival. Ever since the camps, Japanese lesbians and Jewish lesbians had better know there are too many people after our lives for us to give them over easy. These are survivors' poems.

AFTERNOTE

I want to acknowledge Michaele Uccella's skillful probing and editing; pushing me, as usual, one level deeper and clearer.

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Writing these two reviews together, I've been struck by the difference in my responses to these poets, differences which have everything to do with common/alien culture. With Elise Young's work, I perceive the shadows, smells, and echoes behind her words. I trust my intuitive leaps. I could talk at length about a number of issues she raises. (To keep myself from doing so I will here mention "Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity," which appeared in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, from Persephone Press in May 1982, in which I do talk about these issues at length.)

With Michiyo Cornell's poems, I react as a woman, feminist, lesbian, guardian of women and girls, writer about violence against women. My response is not shallow or single-faceted. But turning back and forth between these poets I'm aware of what I must be missing. I don't know the shadows and sounds behind Michiyo Cornell's words, I don't have the information, the cultural context. I have had to confront my ignorance of Japanese-American culture; and to draw on what I do know: conversations over a period of years with my friend Jan Mihara in Portland, Oregon; Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, as well as the work in *This Bridge Called My Back* by her, by Barbara Noda, and other Asian-American women. Completing these reviews leaves me with a developing interest in Japanese- and Asian-American cultures, as if I've made a friend and want to know better who she is.

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“The Intimate Face of Universal Struggle”

Linda C. Powell

A review of *Civil Wars* by June Jordan, Beacon Press, 1981. 188 pp.
\$12.95.

“If you want to know how somebody feels or thinks, ask him,” is the opening line of “On Listening: A Good Way to Hear.” Fortunately for us, June Jordan has never waited to be asked; she has been checking with herself for years, and *Civil Wars* is the result. In this collection Jordan speaks powerfully as subject, in the first person, for herself about her life.

Twenty-two essays, speeches, book excerpts, and diary entries hurtle us non-stop through sixteen years of this black woman/poet/activist’s life, and simultaneously, through her intense struggle to develop as a feeling human being. Along the way there is a riveting short course in Black History.

Reviewing *Civil Wars* is very much like “reviewing” my own life. Jordan and I have covered a lot of the same terrain. We’ve reviewed the same books, attended the same conferences, and been moved by the same historical/hysterical events. Like Jordan, I am a black woman torn by the simultaneous yet seeming contradictory demands of making change, or at least, making a difference. I, too, love women and men (although not, like Jordan, “as well as”). I also live with the question of making sense of what I most love — music — in a world where poverty and deprivation are not only the rule but the order of the day. It is unclear how this familiarity ultimately affects a book review. But it is clear that I recognized many of my own conflicts and resolutions in *Civil Wars*. Those feelings guided me to what is right — and what is very wrong — in this book.

Civil Wars takes me back to basics: The personal truly is political. For many of us this phrase allows the entirety of our lives, the significance of home, family, and relationships. It acknowledges the inner, and the intrapersonal, and yields a more integrated “world”-view. What Jordan charts in *Civil Wars* is the other side of that equation: The political, “out there” is also very personal. Anger is anger, love is love. Jordan challenges us from the position that, for

the whole person, the ability to feel so fiercely about liberation in Angola or the destructive education of black children flows from the same sources as the love for our child, or companion, or a poem. In response to the plaintive question asked by so many of us, "Where do 'I' end and where does 'the world' begin?" Jordan retorts: "Decide for yourself, and choose any stance but victim."

The essays are divided into three groups, with introductory notes for each to establish context and clarity. With "One Way of Beginning This Book" Jordan plunges us into the world of a twenty-four-year old mother in an increasingly unstable interracial marriage, who binges on art, architecture, and the whole world whenever she can arrange care for her young son. The early essays reveal the raw sources of Jordan's power: access to her feelings and the use of politics to structure her vision.

In the next seven selections we are propelled further into the outer world. The voice that so remarkably captured the "nearby" events of emotional growth and personal turmoil grows increasingly articulate about "faraway" ideas and events like free speech, the meaning and purpose of education, and the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa.

In the final section, the core elements of woman, writer, and activist begin to mesh. She clarifies abstracts like "friendship," "community," and "power," and reveals their concrete reality. By the last page, the message for this reader is clear. The wheel of identity and wholeness does *not* have to be endlessly rediscovered. We are *not* totally alone. There are guides, like June Jordan, who have found a way and will share their notes.

Jordan is a lover of words. She uses them as caresses or slaps, and her phrases often provoke sighs and curses. Even the older pieces in this collection still read well. This is due, in part, to the fact that most are exceptionally well written. It is also because the issues are still quite demanding: South Africa is still not free, black children are still destroyed by substandard education, and a woman still cannot walk alone safely.

I had my special favorites. In fact, one of the nicest parts of this collection is meeting so many old favorites from various publications in one place.

I remember coming casually unprepared to "Against the Wall," in an issue of *Seven Days*, and being moved to tears. In eleven short paragraphs, Jordan traces the similarity of situation of the black woman poet taking a walk in Manhattan and the entire First World.

On this night, "the distinctions escape me." She asks,

What is the difference between demanding that I carry "a pass," a certificate of permission to stand on my feet, and terrorist curfews imposed upon my movements because I am a female?

She concludes with a powerful manifesto:

And the moon is full, everywhere, tonight: Southern Africa will become a haven, a situation of supreme safety for the multitudes now suffering rape. And here, in Manhattan, the streets will become a refuge, an agreeable alternative to the house of this particular Black woman, and for women generally, and do you know why I say that with so much calm? . . .

Because all of us who are comparatively powerless, because we have decided that if you interfere, if you seek to intrude, if you undertake to terrorize and to subjugate and to stifle even one more moment of these, our only lives, we will take yours, or die, trying.

It's 12:30 A.M. and now I am going out, by myself, to put this in the mailbox, three blocks away. And, listen: I am not afraid.

Things That I Do in the Dark, Jordan's 1977 collection of selected poems, was reviewed by only one black literary journal and no feminist periodicals. Jordan wrote "Thinking About My Poetry" in response to an imagined query about her creative work process.

This last concept of my work remains the governing criterion, as I write these thoughts, tonight: to be accurate about myself, and to force my mind into a constantly expanding apprehension of my political and moral situation.

Jordan's rigorous personal standards are no more or less demanding than those she sets for others. In "Angola: A Victory and a Promise" she succeeds at what many artists attempt and few achieve. She mixes a movingly written essay with a history of the struggle of the people of Angola and comments on the poet's role in revolution — and closed this article in *First World* magazine with a list of organizations doing Southern Africa support work. Jordan is not being presumptuous or pushy: you *do* want to get involved when you finish!

I was propelled through *Civil Wars* by my feelings. I cried, laughed, and finally, I was consumed by/with a quiet rage. There is something very wrong in the last section. On at least three occasions, Jordan throws up sexuality and sexual preference, and each time, she ducks.

"Where Is the Love?" is Jordan's presentation as participant and

moderator of a 1978 panel, "Feminism and the Black Woman Writer." I was in the audience at Howard University that day. Her comments are as disturbing today as they were four years ago. She says in the introduction of this speech, "In any case, I do not believe that feminism is a matter, first or last, of sexuality." If Jordan means to say that feminist politics do not flow from lesbianism (read: hatred of men) then she is absolutely correct. Feminism is an articulate response to sexism — an ideology that defines women as different/less than men. But sexism shapes, defines, and limits women's sexuality, just as it impacts on relationships, the workplace, health care, etc. So perhaps feminism is not "a matter of" sexuality, but sexuality is most certainly in need of feminist analysis.

She continues:

The session was going to be hot. Evidently, feminism was being translated into lesbianism, into something interchangeable with lesbianism and the taboo on feminism within the Black intellectual community had long been exceeded in its orthodox severity only by the taboo on the subject of the lesbian. I say within the intellectual black community because, minus such terms as *feminist* or *lesbian*, the phenomena of self-directed Black women or the phenomena of Black women loving other women have hardly been uncommon, let alone unbelievable events to Black people not privy to theoretical strife about correct and incorrect Black experience.

Of course there have always been Black women who loved women. *Any* behavior can be grudgingly accommodated as long as it remains "personal," furtive, and totally isolated. It is precisely the moment that behavior is made part of a whole set of issues, the moment that the connections are wired that behavior takes on a much larger significance. Contrary to Jordan's presumption, self-determined black lesbian women who connect their personal choice of lifestyle to the political facts of life — capitalism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism — are *not* commonplace, welcomed, or safe.

In her rush to "defend" feminism from translation to lesbianism, Jordan misses a crucial juncture. The issue is not *sex*, but (hetero)*sexism*. Likewise, the problem is *not* women loving women, or lesbianism, or being self-directed. It is how these behaviors are perceived and punished in the world. Who you sleep with or the color of your skin shouldn't matter, but they both damn well do. The constant question becomes, how to react in the face of the world's hatred, how to make change. Sexuality is the only area where Jordan seems to suggest that silence and victimization are better.

“Declaration of an Independence I Would Just as Soon Not Have” contains a potentially more dangerous misunderstanding. This essay examines the dilemma of a black woman with an international analysis who wants and needs to do activist political work.

One of the final paragraphs says:

And if women loving other women and/or women in love with women will be part and parcel of the manifest revolution we want to win, does that mean that we should condone lecherous, exploitative, shallow, acting-out and pathological behavior by women who term themselves lesbians — in much the same way that we, Black people, once voluntarily called ourselves *niggas* out of a convoluted mood of defiance, a mood that proved to be heavily penetrated by unconscious, continuing self-hatred?

I have read this passage tens of times.

Is that how Jordan describes the behavior of “women who term themselves lesbians”? Is she equating lesbian as a word/description/identity with one of the most hated of racist epithets? Is she suggesting that lesbians are simply “defiant” and “acting out of self-hatred”? What would a woman who prefers women *call* herself? In a heterosexist/homophobic culture, Jordan’s alternative sounds like the closet to me.

Our job is not to deny the connections between feminism and lesbianism, but to build and clarify them. That political analysis and clarification is the only way to silence the discussion of the “Black woman writer’s bedroom activities” that Jordan so deplors.

These are not *my* standards for consistency. In “Thinking About My Poetry,” Jordan says,

What, I sometimes wonder, am I trying to do, exactly? I think I am trying to keep myself free, that I am trying to become responsive and responsible to every aspect of my human being . . .

In “Notes of a Barnard Dropout” she self-describes:

I am somebody seeking to make, or to create, revolutionary connections between the full identity of my love, of what hurts me, or fills me with nausea, and the way things are: what we are forced to learn, to “master,” what we are trained to ignore, what we are bribed into accepting, what we are rewarded for doing or not doing . . .

Seeing and making connections are Jordan’s tasks for herself. She can perceive the ties that bind Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Southern Africa’s struggle for liberation, and powerfully articulate them so that *others* can see them. Why does she refuse to even attempt to build the “revolutionary connections” between female

sexuality and the existence of *Playboy/Hustler* magazines? Jordan does not have to make these connections in her own intimate life; perhaps for her, sexuality and its expression is the simpler matter of "civil rights." But why does she continue to make totally invisible the black women for whom sexuality exists as part of a constellation of power issues, choices, and possibilities?

Jordan works so much magic in *Civil Wars*, why harp on this one point? First, because this book's impact on my feelings tells a lot about it. From the beginning, I promised more of a book "reaction" than a review, with its assumption of "objectivity." Jordan's attitude toward sexuality got to me like nothing else. She echoes the societal message that what is most my own does not deserve attention. I felt as though a family member had slammed a door in my face, or slapped me very sharply. Can we as black women/feminists afford that?

Secondly, feminism means something very specific to me. It is a way of seeing and being in the world that commits me to making connections. Jordan's comment, "My life seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle," is the clearest description I've ever read describing feminist process. Given our shared assumptions involved in being a feminist becoming a human being, Jordan's denial of sexuality as a central *political* question is an insoluble contradiction for me.

Finally, *Civil Wars* will command a considerable audience within the intellectual black community. Once again, the issue of sexuality/sexual preference has been relegated to a never-never land outside the necessary purview of radical black politics. Jordan has missed or thrown away a valuable opportunity to support, if not agree with, black people who want to talk about lifestyle and sexual preference within a context of sexism/feminism/sex roles. Once again, we've been called "out of line."

Simply, it is a very important book with a very serious flaw. Without hesitation I can recommend *Civil Wars* to white feminist friends who want to know more about being black in America: they are familiar with this "waffling" around the issue of sexuality. I am far more conflicted about my black friends interested in feminism. They would need to know that many feminists draw *political* connections to their *sexuality*.

The intensity of my reaction must also be related to heightened expectations: Jordan swims out so very far that I begin to hope she'll make the other side and find "the answer . . ." And if there is

any overall message in *Civil Wars*, it is that *no answer*, in either a global political sense, or an internal, intrapersonal sense, is valid unless it emerges from a well-examined life. She says in the final essay:

Neither race nor gender provides the final definitions of jeopardy or refuge. The final risk or final safety lies within each one of us attuned to the messy and intricate and unending challenge of self-determination. I believe the ultimate power of all the people rests upon the individual ability to trust and to respect the authority of the truth of whatever it is that each of us feels, each of us means. On what basis should *what* authority exceed the authority of *this* truth?

So while there may not be an "answer," there is commitment, that constant checking out of our insides, what Jordan calls faith. Read this book *thoughtfully*, prepare to get angry, and start your own civil wars.

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“To This Precise Humanity”

Bernice Mennis

A review of *Bones and Kim* by Lynn Strongin. Published in 1980 by Spinsters, Ink, R.D.1, Argyle, N.Y. 12809. 116 pp. \$5.50

I was very moved by Lynn Strongin's *Bones and Kim*, but it is a difficult book to read and an even more difficult book to write about. There is no clear plot; no distinct action takes place. Kim, the central character and dominating consciousness (sometimes speaking in the first person, sometimes spoken about in the third person), is a thirty-five-year-old college teacher living in the Southwest with Norah, her lover, in a "marriage" of one year. On sabbatical to write a thesis on "Religion in Three Women Poets," Kim has the time/space to allow her mind to open to her past — to people, events, words, feelings — and be self-conscious of her present. The novel is about her journey into her past and present. It is Kim's sensitive exploration of her mind's intricate landscape.

The route to the past is not direct. It's full of repeated scenes, refrains, images, people occurring again and again with slight variations, resonating echoes. (Kim says that she has an "ecclesiastical sense of time.") Past and present float together — as they do, always, in our lives, both confusing and connecting. In writing to her mother, Bones, Kim says: "My mind, Bones, is not linear but contrapuntal, I hear several voices at once" (p. 21). *Bones and Kim* is contrapuntal, a music of many voices — subtle and perceptive layers of feeling and thought, juxtaposed without transitions or connections; a language of poetry and nuance, a language of "knowledge in the breast," not the mind; of "roundness without an edge," not clear lines; of "light cast backward from the hermit crab," not direct light. The result is a complexly woven, powerful work which often brings the reader into a deep water of understanding and feeling, but which can also leave her stranded on the shore and/or drowning with little to grab on to.

It's not that Strongin does not deal with very concrete, powerful realities. Kim is a Jewish child during Hitler's war. She grows up in a South where she sees "black men digging trenches, balls chained to their ankles," where she sings Christmas songs to someone else's god. She is "poor white trash," feeling the chains of poverty restricting her life, denying her access. After an unhappy marriage her parents divorce. She moves from the South to the North and back again, always in strange environments. At twelve she is struck down with polio, "brought home not to walk again."

The frozen, stark photographs and refrains of the past are repeated again and again, nightmares of Kim's waking mind:

A child stood shivering on a railway platform in the South during the War, the Hitler War. Outside Miami Beach, 1943. It was two o'clock in the morning. She was five years old and wore a patch over one eye to cut her double vision. (p.9)

The palm trees drip, thick ugly leather fronds. We're locked out of our hotel room, our gifts — puny as the pile is — are locked inside. (p. 37)

Railroad ties. A child stood walking, making connections with her past. The hospital, Monday nights they'd be wheeled, flat on stretchers to old Gene Autry movies in the huge vat of a hospital auditorium, like a vat for boiling. The flatness of their posture mirrored the cardboard dimension of smiling Dale Evans . . . (p. 70)

I place you in a narrow cot, the linen so stiff it cuts your flesh. Beside your cot on your bedstand of zinc stands the shiny aluminum toothbrush cup in its kidney pan. It's early morning, so early that it's night. . . . You're twelve and have just been through a disease that left you paralyzed from the waist down. Your back's stiff as an iron washboard. . . . In approximately three minutes the morning matron will come and call the rollcall of the fifty children in the ward. You know the last name rollcall by heart and repeat the names under your breath as the nurse calls them. . . . For you are in the last cubicle of the ward. Your cubiclemate died. (p.99)

A child forever waiting for her father's return from war; a Jew in a Christian society; a twelve-year-old in a cubicle in a state hospital — Strongin (and Kim) explore the "hole which begins to invade our lives when we're too much alone" (p. 35). That isolation finds echoes in other forms, in other people. So Kim thinks of Rella, her grandmother from Roumania, wrenched from her home in New York City to a hospital in a strange and alien Arizona to live (and die); of Stacey, the Latin teacher, senile in an old age home, unable to speak a sentence of her beloved Latin; of Hannah, Kim's first lover, "small like a medieval man," clothed in

a stiff layer of protection, at age forty-eight allowing love to enter; of seventy-year-old Carey, Kim's neighbor upstairs, living alone, widowed, needy and possessive yet strong and independent; of Bones, left by her husband with two children, her art held within her for years, "trying to live down the temper she was born with." War, poverty, divorce, racism, anti-Semitism, sickness, aging are the threads of the warp. The threads of the woof are the aloneness, exclusion, paralysis (literal and figurative), fear, pain, and rage. And, finally, later, understanding, compassion, and love. Strongin does not analyze the material or emotional realities. She carefully weaves the web, touches the boundaries and surfaces, showing patterns of shade and color.

For me, the power of the novel lay in the images and words of the past, woven together into a haunting, moving chorus of picture and sound; in the sensitive consciousness recording the present and seeing clearly the complexity of life; in the language of poetry that connects the past and the present; in the wisdom and truth that emerge. The problems are that sometimes Kim's consciousness, formed and deepened by isolation and pain, loses perspective and seems stuck in a solipsism which Strongin, as the author, cannot see. Some of the juxtapositions of scenes and words are complex and confusing, and block rather than further insight. The added layers of a *Civil War Journal*, whose words are interspersed in the text, seem like extra baggage. Kim's embroidery of a Maine lighthouse scene, started at the beginning of the work and finished at the end, seems too self-conscious as an envelope structure. The rage and violence stemming from illness, frustration, powerlessness, are mentioned often but neither explored nor really conveyed. At times I want the novel to do what it does not claim to do, and be what it is not — I want more analysis, more direct, linear thought, more penetration and exploration of emotional realities. And sometimes I feel the lack of a real structure or organization; *Bones and Kim* sometimes reads more like a journal than a novel.

The novel is, however, ultimately satisfying to me. There are beginning threads—words, people, themes, scenes—that after being painfully twisted are finally unraveled and brought to rest. The child, Kim, waiting for the father who never really returns, becomes the adult awaiting Norah's homecoming. It's an old refrain with a new ending: "A child stood shivering on a railway platform. . . . For the first time it struck her: *she* will be here, by me, all

winter" (p. 89). And, later, "I know my love will come" (p. 95). The pain of illness, having closed her off in a "hermetic" existence, now allows love in: "The text for a long time in my life has been illness. Now it's green" (p. 108). Kim's violence and anger towards Bones turns to love, understanding, identification, and acceptance: "These evenings, while she contemplated what must have been the avalanching solitude of those years on Bones, she feels uplifted, as a bird started to sing: 'survival.' They survived it: no worse, no better than state hospital at twelve" (p. 79). To her grandmother, Kim wrote: "Bless you for bringing Bones into the world. As she is ruthless with herself, so she is with others. It takes half a lifetime for a daughter to comprehend a mother's bravery" (p. 95).

"Memory has been a tunnel which sucked me backward, and there I saw the light at the end" (p. 114). Acceptance and love of Bones is part of Kim's larger acceptance of her pain, her paralysis, her self. Addie, Kim's doctor, is the teacher. "Tough, resilient, but offering no softness that was compromise with truth" (p. 109), Addie, for whom "work is love made practical," teaches Kim to see and accept realities which cannot be changed: "You can't, Kimberly, push the sick child. You can't whip the trees into blooming, you can't shove the river. Yet you, Kimmie, have been trying. All these years" (p. 108). "Take trips up the mountain. Only come in after for treatment" (p. 62). "Of pain . . . that's the nature of the beast."

At the end of the novel Kim learns that she has "outwitted . . . surgery again." But she has learned, even more, an acceptance of the pain which allows her to move on:

We cry out against the physician. But growing up comes when we realize there's only so much she or he can do. She too becomes ill, sinks, sickens, succumbs, dies, hears her own small death, her own, coming in the night. And despite the longing in all of us for Immaculate Conception, away from the turmoil and limitation those particular two humans confer, we must trace our way back to this precise humanity. Goodnight, Addie: I'm carrying this letter upstairs. I raise a candle for its light, rather than raise a hand in anger.

(pp. 115-16)

Bones and Kim moved me. I thank Strongin for its light.

What Can Be Sustained

Susan Wood-Thompson

A review of *Lesbian Writer: Collected Work of Claudia Scott* by Claudia Scott, edited by Frances Hanckel and Susan Windle. Published in 1981 by Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, Florida 32302. 114 pp. \$4.50.

Claudia Scott writes about questions that are familiar to any lesbian: how to be part of a family with values different from one's own, how to join — or keep separate — lesbianism and public life, how to sustain the value of successive homes and friendships in other towns, and how to create the life one wants out of the materials at hand. Scott presents these questions in the kinds of poems that lesbian journals characteristically carry: poems with autobiographical, narrative, dramatic, and political emphases. She answers them most completely, however, in a different kind of poem, in which resolutions appear primarily on the level of such non-human images as stones, waves, and seasons.

First the questions. In "Not Moving" the speaker tells her mother of the strength she has found in their ancestors' lives. The mother rejects, as different from her own, values that are not grounded solely in a husband. The speaker goes further, explaining her own individual life, and meeting the same reaction:

I blurt out words I came to share
of having reconciled my life, fashioned
my place, arrived at a destination
it seems I have not arrived
a woman's place is not given, and a journey
without perfect peace is merely
wandering and wasted time

(p. 4)

The title, "Not Moving," describes the mother's refusal to enlarge her viewpoint to accommodate her daughter's experience. A number of the poems about parental family members, and the

book's one short story, urgently convey the author's need for uncoercive closeness. In the story, "Get Up, It's Snowing Foxes," the rigid daily enforcement of family ties is "the cult of an ancient, stifling, unproductive, hollow religion" (p. 87) that leaves the daughter with a frustrated rage for creating her life solely on her own terms.

Although scenes of the lesbian community have, more often than not, the warmest, easiest atmosphere in the book, individual relationships remind me of those in the family, with conflicting needs to be both close and apart. These distance problems show in concern over staying, moving, returning, losing, sustaining. In "All Post Cards Eagerly Accepted" the speaker's friend brings up the question about maintaining closeness over distance:

"Again our letters answering each other's
questions have crossed in the mail.
If we can just sustain such eagerness
you haven't been gone long"
a year, two years
in the context of expecting we will not
again live near each other, no, not long
and what can be sustained?
what has the resonance to carry
to be shared in separated lives?

(p. 32)

and the author tells us

what I want to sustain
is her perspective, her long view
of me, my life, what I have been
what I have expected to be
and thereby her prerogative
her earned right and ability
as an old friend to call me on
what I am doing

(p. 33)

Accurate, honest images, then, are what we can give each other, what we need each other for. One poem in particular, "Triptych: For a Good Woman Poet," makes some of Scott's values and conflicts as a poet explicit. The central problem is that a prominent poet whose work is very important to Scott does not come out as a lesbian, but rather writes "in personal / but never private terms," which is to say about her life, but in an unrevealing way. In some ways this poet, Elizabeth Bishop, even disassociates herself from her own viewpoint in her work. Giving poetry readings, she is non-

assertive in appearance and manner—all in all, she inhabits the men's poetry world which has heaped honors on her, but she has apparently done this in contradiction to and at the expense of the woman-identification she may feel privately.

At readings she seems ill at ease
she mumbles, does not phrase,
does not present her poems, in fact,
reads as though they were completely
unfamiliar and quite separate
from this rather frumpy woman
inexplicably, unwittingly on stage

That skill has also been acquired
over sixty years of being a good woman
properly dissociating her perceptions
of her general experience from her self
Her poems are accessible
refreshingly devoid of private fears
obsessions, fantasies, quirks
She does not obtrude
She writes well
is accepted, poet among poets
woman among men

(pp. 55-56)

Scott has not chosen this route, and knows that she will probably forfeit the kind of public accessibility Elizabeth Bishop's work has enjoyed.

Scott objects to Bishop's

holding up that image
to a younger woman poet
as a way to be accepted
taken seriously as a poet, read
an image that is not at all like me

To be recognized by women
there are other expectations
about content, point of view
and then what—the support
of women doesn't make the same waves
and I have no proof it ever will

(pp. 56-57)

Although the poem ends with Scott's claim that she respects Bishop's diversity, in this matter she is still struggling to do so, if I judge by the fact that the poem's strongest imagery comes in pro-

testing Bishop's choice. Scott is calling Bishop on her lack of integrity, particularly in the face of the need younger lesbian poets have for images of strong lesbian poets. This is one of the book's many poems that take seriously our responsibility to each other and to ourselves.

Lesbian Writer as a whole brings up questions about what lesbian poetry is. As a poet I am aware of exactly when I decided to write solely with and about women, and of the decision that followed to submit to lesbian journals only. Together these choices had a big effect on my poetry, because I usually write with a sense of explaining my viewpoint to someone. Who that someone is influences the direction of the explanation. In the years covered by Scott's book, I find her writing all kinds of poems: those that speak to a lesbian audience (for example, "Patterns: Variations," "Names," "Two Women at the Luxembourg") and those that address a more general group or even, in their lack of lesbian content, a nonlesbian audience (for example, "Picasso finally is dead," "Grass," "For Thomas Eakins"). The former poems — which I appreciate most — are in some instances explicitly lesbian and in others identifiably so only because they appear in proximity to the explicit ones. The spectrum includes, for example, a poem in which a woman is clearly attracted to and becomes sexually involved with another woman ("Towards an Absence of Mirrors"), and at least two poems about women trying to help each other find their own strength ("Though Ourselves Inside Remain as Stones" and "All Post Cards Eagerly Accepted"), along with poems about integrity in art ("Triptych" and "it was the sky, the grey") and those about the difficulty of understanding one's own life ("The Merits and Limitations of Euclidean Geometry or Going Home" and "I have sent you all away"). Other poems seem veiled in that they describe situations I take to be lesbian, but Scott avoids pronouns and other identifying words. These are poems that in a nonlesbian journal I would assume describe heterosexual encounters, unless I already know the poet to be a lesbian.

As I read *Lesbian Writer* I find myself wondering if other poets besides me write with a sense of audience outside themselves. I wonder if the distinctions I've made in my writing years are ones that a writer with Scott's political range would find artificially narrow; if there is a distinction in her work between times when lesbian community was most present to her, and other times when a sense of general "personhood" overrode a sense of lesbianism.

Though Scott protests this aspect of Bishop's work, the choice of Bishop as mentor indicates at least an ability to respond deeply to poetry in which "personhood" is the greater — in fact the obliterating — consideration.*

The questions of where a lesbian wants to publish and what poets she can learn from are complex. The implication of this book's title does not allow for the ambivalence of political approaches in the poetry. As Scott wrote in "Triptych," "To be recognized by women / there are expectations / about content, point of view. . . ." To what extent do we as lesbian poets want to control our subject matter and our approaches to it, and if we do want such control, what are the best ways of achieving it? And what do we do with those poems that fall outside the limits we have chosen? Our answers to these questions may change, may be changing in lesbian poetry as a whole right now. The larger question is that of what we want our poetry to be, and is enmeshed with the question of what we want our lives to be.

Lesbian Writer has, toward the end, fourteen pages of "Notes for Poems, 1978-79," most of which face directly the complexities and implications of those responsibilities toward ourselves. In "Working on My House," fixing the house up is clearly a metaphor for fixing one's life up in the face of urgent questions about what can be sustained:

how did the builders of cathedrals
go on dressing stones
year after year
according to a plan two generations old
and knowing the tower would be only
half done when they died

(p. 100)

The fullest resolution to the kinds of conflict described in *Lesbian Writer* generally comes in non-human images of boundaryless diffusion, translucence, or in opposing forces — such as stillness and motion — working together. "The Waves" introduces a question in human terms:

*where do I and this life stand face
to face? how will I know when,
as a wave hangs, hangs and suddenly
breaks, it comes to be mine*

(p. 110)

*I've never believed that a general sense of personhood is possible; I think people who think they believe in it really believe in white heterosexuality. But, to me Scott's poems sound as if *she* believed in it, and Bishop's do too.

Scott finds a resolution in focusing on her own “image in a memory,” combining it with the motion of waves “lucid thin green” rushing hard along the sand, and bringing them to this final realization:

*and this moment of my life
that is my life keeps passing
passing as the waves pass
on the sand a grain of sand
back and forth
back and forth*

(p. 111)

The depiction of the ocean as a large, stable entity whose character is to be ceaselessly in motion (along with poems about stones rising out of the ground, eroding and returning to it, and the seasons’ effect on a garden) emphasizes a view of life as cyclical. These massive actions, along with the particular motions — leaving, returning, staying, finding oneself about to do something, having just completed something — give a freshness to the commonplace observation that women experience life cyclically.

The same force of resolution exists for Scott in thin, translucent things. Fine afternoon rain, stained-glass windows provide some of her most beautiful imagery:

It was the thirteenth century
the apogee of brilliantly stained glass
And yet at Lincoln, Canterbury, York
they were also creating grisaille
grey and green-grey windows
I read now that brightly stained glass
must have been in short supply, expensive,
limited by the austere Cistercians, or
too dark in these dark English skies
It couldn’t of course have had anything
to do with what they saw

the grey sky
filled with water
the diffuse grey light
green through the water
and bright after
it was the grey sky

(“it was the sky,” p. 79)

These monochromatic windows are my favorite image, replicating for me the whole book’s tone of concentration, its modulation of a few major themes and images.

If, as the number of Scott's poems that can serve as metaphors for writing poetry suggests, imagery is the level that fascinated her the most, it is worth examining further. One of my favorite aspects of her imagery is its reaching outside traditional assumptions about writing by women. More textural imagery exists here than in most poetry, and the textures frequently feel rough like stone, or hard like glass, and are often found outdoors. Images for the poet and her close relationships are architectural, mechanical, geometrical, geological, planetary — and reflect familiarity with those realms. Emotionally exhausted, she is "a ball and socket joint / habitually underoiled" (p. 108); sleepless, she is a worn tooth "in the second hand gear of the clock" (p. 35); strength between lovers has come from a process like that of "magma cooling, molded / to an igneous core" (p. 20).

In every aspect of Scott's poems I hear a tone of deliberateness, a conscious honing of her options with language. She tries a number of approaches to imagery, sound, diction, syntax, sequence of events, and what she calls "focus / and perspective as part of the meaning" (p. 31). She seems to explore many ideas about poetry, discovering what she does best in a way that, had she written longer, might have remained characteristic or might have turned into a more nearly exclusive development of her greatest strengths. At this point, however, I find some poems labored, the meticulousness or technical virtuosity constituting a poem's central passion (for example, "The Merits and Limitations of Euclidean Geometry," "In an Absence of Mirrors," and "How Do You Think Poets Should Behave in Bars?").

My favorite of Scott's technical achievements is her sense of temporal perspective. Many of her poems gain interest from their timing in relation to the event described: the first moments of arriving, after vacation, at an empty house; the moments during which Orpheus rationalizes, just preparatory to turning to look at — and thereby lose — Eurydice. This approach gives the tension of both boundary experience and the anxiety felt when we do not witness the final resolution. I know Orpheus is going to turn, but since I do not get to see him doing it, I am still on a precipice. One of my favorite poems benefits from the way both spatial and temporal boundary settings match emotional brink:

WATCHING A WOMAN DECIDE

she is sitting by the lake
in March between the lake

and early rush hour traffic
joggers and dog watchers
between her and me
she is sitting
thinking by the lake now
after crying out the story
drinking and forgetting and remembering
the story in a fury, in tears
running the details over, over
pounding at the simple sentence
that is all it takes to tell
what happened is clear
and incomprehensible

both of us are sitting by the lake
between the traffic and the lake
with passing strangers between us
if she walks toward the water
what will I do

(p. 42)

The tone of this poem and a number of others in the book is one of emotional courage at a testing point.

Leaving matters of style behind, I want to end by responding to Frances Hanckel and Susan Windle's editing of *Lesbian Writer*. They completed it within a year and a half of Claudia Scott's suicide, and Hanckel's "Introduction" gives her impression of the factors leading up to the death. "Notes for Poems: 1978-79," which Windle introduced with biographical facts and arranged, include among them the last such notes Scott made, which describe her feeling that she can no longer sustain life. The suicide of a young woman poet (Scott was thirty-one) can be a riveting awareness when we consider that woman's life. It is difficult not to view her work solely through her death — a practice that has prompted a great deal of sentimental, sensational writing about the poetry of other women who have taken their own lives. It is difficult to read a poet's work as it was written, by a living person — and not as if it were written after she had made the choice to die. But it is essential that we do so, for two reasons. First, that *is* when it was written, and we wrench its meaning if we read otherwise. Second, to make suicide the great exception is simply to divorce it from all other human action in a way that can only be motivated by the reader's need to feel safe, to feel that she lives in a different world where suicide is as much an impossibility for her as it was an "inevitability" for the poet in question. In this process we objectify women who

kill themselves. And in so doing we take the poet and the poetry less seriously — we do not let ourselves feel fully the currents of ambiguity in their lives, the hard-won value of their insights, the commitment that they have had toward the less severe resolutions they have also achieved. To make the suicide woman and her death life-size is our job in a book like this, and one the editors help us with. We can, thereby, give the joyous poems that report fulfillments, and those in which the process of writing furthers the poet's developing consciousness the same weight as those most expressing need. The book gives us many points in the poet's emotional and perceptual cycles, the flux created out of the sustained values of her writing life.

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Black, Brave, and Woman, Too

Cheryl Clarke

A review of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Published by The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. 401 pp. \$8.95.

... This is a situation in which those of us who research minority and/or women writers are familiar with — having to rescue these figures from some comfortable, circumscribed shadow and place them in their own light. (Hull, G., "Researching Alice Dunbar-Nelson: A Personal and Literary Perspective," *Some of Us Are Brave*, p. 192.)

Black American women have been objectified in the flesh, in the language, in the literature, and in the body politic for several centuries. Black women know we have shared and shaped the struggle, development, and triumph of the coerced immigrant, the Afro-American. Black women have been on the front line of the war for survival in the racist United States. We and our black brothers have worked together as partners, comrades, allies, and adversaries for that oft-thwarted goal — black liberation.

The Black Woman. Her loyalty to black people cannot be questioned. In fact, the presumption historically has been made that the black woman's primary commitment is black liberation. In order not to seem individualistic, the black woman did not — in action — necessarily distinguish her struggle from her people's, though she might muse publicly and privately, in letters, diaries, poems, on her double slave lot. The race and the struggle against racism occupied and preoccupied her. These preoccupations created a myopia. Race and all it means in the United States is overwhelming and consuming. One can understand how the black woman might low-profile her concerns over, for example, capitalism, labor, suffrage for women, "free love," abortion, international affairs, et. al. The black woman would say to herself: "Time for all that later. Gotta triumph over this race thing. After all isn't racism the reason we're poor, unemployed, can't vote, can't love who we want to love, can't control our bodies, and are kept out of the international domain?"

And like Sarah Douglass in 1837, the black woman affirm(s)ed, "I believe they despise us for our color" (Lerner, G., ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, 1973, p. 362).

Black women cast our lot with black people. What else was really out there? The Women's Movement. Feminism. The women's movement and feminism have figured significantly in the lives and development of black women from the time of the great social movements of the early nineteenth century. Black women have a feminist tradition. But black women could not ally with white women solely on the basis of gender oppression. Far too much other contradiction was unresolved, namely, white skin and class privilege. At least we share the race and ex-slave status with all other black people. Of course, it has been argued that white women too have been slaves.

We cast our lot with black people. And did our duty. And while we were busy and productive — "behind the scenes," "in the background," and "being the backbone" — our achievements in politics, art, education, service, et. al., were being credited to men or not credited at all — just taken and used. It is curious how black women built schools and churches, organized rebellions, hoed fields, ran old age homes, plus kept households, raised children, worked like beavers all the days of our lives — all in the same day, all in the same lifetime. Yet, any time when attention has been focused on the contributions of Afro-Americans, it is black men who are dredged up from obscurity. The traditions black women have passed on to our daughters and sisters remained anonymous, with few exceptions.

The impetus of feminism, i.e., women interpreting our lives for, by, and about women, has been a rescuing force for the tradition of black women. However, we have had our invisibility to and betrayal at the hands of the predominantly white women's movement. When the contributions women have made to American culture are catalogued, those of black women are strangely omitted. In spite of the sometimes willful, sometimes unconscious exclusion of black women from the ritual of acknowledgment, black women are on the brink of synthesizing the politics of women's liberation and the politics of black liberation for our own personal-is-political development, as opposed to making all the sacrifices. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, is part of that synthesis.

But Some of Us Are Brave, subtitled "Black Women's Studies," is an impressive work: nineteen theoretical, sociological, literary, pedagogical essays; six extensive bibliographic essays; a listing of approximately eighty-nine references in addition to the extensive references, bibliographies, and notes that document and accompany the essays; twenty black women's studies course syllabi; a catalogue of non-print materials on black women; and eleven black and white photographs of black women of all ages, backgrounds, classes, from as long ago as 1902. The credentials and experiences of the contributors — all black American women except one white woman contributor and two white women co-authors — certainly debunk any myths of "idiocy," "illiteracy," or "vacuousness" (p. xviii). *Brave* is a political, pedagogical tool for use by us. A survival manual for all of us stuck down here in this swamp of western male letters. *Brave* attempts to free us from the quicksand — Helga Crane rescued from the quagmire, revisited, revised, and resuscitated!*

The guiding politics of *Brave* are black feminist. Its orientation is heavily literary, which is a critical flaw. Though not all the contributors identify themselves or their processes as feminist, without exception, the writers are black-woman-centered. *Brave* is not an apologia. It is an assertion of black women's existence as intellectual, sentient beings. Hull and Smith, both longtime advocates of the liberation of black women writers from the fetters of anonymity, eloquently and forthrightly introduce us in "The Politics of Black Women's Studies" to the challenge of black women's studies in their assertion:

... Black feminism has made a space for Black women's studies to exist and, through its commitment to all Black women will provide the basis for its survival...

... Only a feminist, pro-woman perspective that acknowledges the reality of sexual oppression in the lives of black women, as well as the oppression of race and class, will make Black women's studies the transformer of consciousness it needs to be. (pp. xx-xxi)

In the last fourteen years of acute political repression, only those academics most loyal to white male patriarchal education, i.e., the Ph.D., the tenured, the prolifically published and profusely adored dilettantes, have been retained in our once radical academic programs, e.g., black studies, women's studies. And black women's

*Helga Crane is the protagonist in Nella Larsen's novel, *Quicksand* (reprinted in 1971 by Collier Books, N.Y.).

studies, if it is ever institutionalized, will suffer the same fate, even though the editors caution that this trend toward "respectability," individualism, "acceptance" is a "trap that Black women's studies cannot afford to fall into" (p. xxi).

Like the editors, I believe that pedagogy need not only exist in a college classroom. For black women's studies to be a "transformer of consciousness," it *must* somehow be consumed by the "supposedly 'ordinary' Black women whose 'unexceptional' actions enabled us and the race to survive" (p. xxi). I believe that the perpetuity of a radical black women's studies is dependent upon its distance from traditional white and male institutions of high learning and otherwise. In its philosophy and vision, *Brave* is adaptable to the struggle of naming ourselves to black women who exist and survive outside the academic colony and who are in need of a "pro-feminist" and "anti-racist" perspective in their lives.

I would suggest that "Visions and Recommendations" (p. xxxiii), co-authored by Hull, Scott, and Smith, be amended to read: "That Black women's studies be accountable to black women of all ages." Were it not for the three photographs of older black women reproduced in the text, one might presume that black women do not live beyond the age of forty.

The first section of *Brave* is devoted to "establishing the framework in which black women's studies can most successfully be taught" (p. xxx). Michele Wallace's herstoric article, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood" (1975) is reprinted here and formally opens the volume. In her candid style, Wallace broke the silence of isolated black feminists by proclaiming our existence and our invisibility to one another. She was also the first to address the sexual politics in the black community from a feminist perspective, especially those politics which proliferated during the late sixties and early seventies, wherein "the 'new Blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters."

Strategically following Wallace's piece is the pivotal contribution to radical black feminist thought, "A Black Feminist Statement," prepared by the Combahee River Collective. Never before has there been a model of black feminist practice which iridesces all the factors of oppression and attempts to integrate our struggles against racism, sexism, class oppression, homophobia, violence against women, imperialism, et. al. The intent of this statement is to give us a vision of revolution and the implements to effect and sustain a revolution. The piece attempts to synthesize all of black

women's oppressions, chiefly race, sex, and class, into a dialectic of resistance and liberation.

The bibliographic listing by Patricia Bell Scott, "Selected Bibliography on Black Feminism," is comprehensive and educational, and certainly provides a resource for those who would teach or want to know about black women's herstorical considerations of ourselves as women. Scott's use of the term "feminist" is problematic. Many of the works listed are feminist, i.e., written by women who call themselves feminists. Many are not. I believe we must differentiate between black women in history who comment on women's struggle for "equality" or who can articulate a feminist line, and black women who postulate that women's liberation will be effected through the practice of woman-centered politics and the destruction of male supremacy. The latter are feminists. This bibliographic listing does not differentiate between those women who call themselves feminists and those who talk about women. Angela Davis, for example, is not a feminist, though she can articulate a feminist line. Inez Smith Reid, for another example, is decidedly anti-feminist. The glaring shortcoming of Joyce Ladner's work, as a third example, is that she did not adopt a feminist approach to her study of adolescent black women, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (1971). Yet, Davis's autobiography is listed as a "black feminist" work. Reid's and Ladner's works are listed under the category, "The Contemporary Black Feminist Movement." While all our contributions are valuable, let us not create the illusion that any black woman who writes about black women is a feminist.

Novelist Alice Walker opens Section II, "Roadblocks and Bridges: Confronting Racism," with the satirical narrative, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s) — An Excerpt." I must admit to my personal difficulty with "Our Mother" — Ama Ata Aidoo notwithstanding — the virtuous persona, who goes about in her various bourgeois women's settings tersely calling white feminists to account for their racism and "educated and successful" black women to account for their anti-feminism. The piece is zany, nonetheless. At the very end Walker's form shifts from the narrative to a more expository form. Seeming truly to have become "Our Mother," the author formally concludes the piece with a warning to black women:

To the extent that Black women dissociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of

radical Black herstorical tradition: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer would not have liked it. Nor do I.
(p. 42)

Patricia Meyer Spacks, Judy Chicago, and Ellen Moers are then singled out and attacked by Walker, in a series of footnotes, as emblems of racist ignorance of the contributions of black women to art and letters. This digression would have been more meaningful within the text, especially the criticism of the Sojourner Truth Plate in Chicago's exhibit, "The Dinner Party":

... The Sojourner Truth Plate is the only one in the collection that shows — instead of a vagina — a face. . . .

It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine Black women have vaginas.
(pp. 42-43)

The historical, sociological Section III, "Dispelling the Myths: Black Women and the Social Sciences," offers three informative essays on the status of black women in the social sciences. However, Erlene Stetson's essay, "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave," is the best of this section and one of the best in the collection.

Stetson's elucidatory and lengthy essay on the black slave woman is a thoughtful, well-written piece. She sets forth the problems of research and pedagogy in this neglected area of study. In her attempt to teach the herstory of the black woman as slave, Stetson allows her class to become a research body, reconstructing herstory from scattered sources, raising questions which provoke further inquiry, and tracing the sources of prevalent myths regarding the black woman's non-womanness (vaginalessness).

Stetson reports nineteen questions raised by her students for further inquiry, the most provocative for me being, "Were monogamous relationships possible between women, between white and Black women, or only between women and men?" For the sake of pedagogy, I would like to suggest an additional question for future black women's studies classes to ponder: What has been the impact on the psychology of black women of the political sanction of centuries of violence against black women? Within the previously discussed pedagogical framework, Stetson offers an interesting historical perspective on ante-bellum women, black and white. She raises thoughtful questions about the pedagogical uses of black women's slave narratives and provides a bibliographic listing of black women's slave narratives, which will be invaluable to any student

of black women. However, Stetson does not seriously examine the differential brutality leveled against the black slave woman. She chooses not to be critical of how white women exploited the analogy between their oppression in marriage and the enslavement of blacks.

Beginning Section IV, "Creative Survival: Preserving Body, Mind, and Spirit," is Beverly Smith's bibliographic essay, "Black Women's Health: Notes for a Course," which is urgently relevant to Hull's and Smith's assertion that black women's studies must be connected to black women's lives. I can think of no one issue more critical to our survival than health, which black women have the least of, like everything else. The bibliographic materials are a mixture of clinical, but mostly literary references. I regret that the issue of aging is not raised here, as black women's health problems increase as we age and there are certain health concerns concomitant with aging. However, the neglect of the issue of black women's aging throughout this collection is regrettable.

Jacquelyn Grant's essay, "Black Women and the Church," is excellent herstorography. It is a call to revolutionize the patriarchal god of Western culture, which black people have adopted, into a "holistic Black theology." And black women in the church must be catalysts for the transformation of the black church:

... If, as I contend, the liberation of Black men and women is inseparable then a radical split cannot be made between racism and sexism. Black women are oppressed by racism and sexism. It is therefore necessary that Black men and women be actively involved in combatting both evils. (p. 148)

At the end, Grant's essay rings with evangelism — and this always disturbs me. Perhaps it is my atheism. I have as little patience with a "black theology" as I do with a "feminist theology." Grant even capitalizes the word "god"! She says, in those opiate tones:

Such a theology will "allow" God through the Holy Spirit *to work through persons* without regard to race, sex, or class. This theology will exercise its prophetic function and serve as a "self-test" in a church characterized by the sins of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. (p. 149; italics mine)

Well, now, all I can say is, like the lady in red: "i found god in myself & i loved her/i loved her fiercely."^o

^oNtozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1976), p. 64.

Michele Russell's essay, "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," is insightful, skillfully written, and attempts to use the medium of the blues as a repository of the traditions of poor black women. Of the blues, Russell says:

... They are the expression of a particular social process by which poor Black women have commented on all the major theoretical, practical, and political questions facing us and have created a mass audience who listens to what we say in that form [the blues]. (p. 130)

As exponents of the blues form, and thus exponents of poor black women, Russell chooses five black women singers, whose music reflects the Afro-American's song of freedom: Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Esther Phillips. Of the five she discusses, Bessie Smith and Bessie Jackson were "city" blues singers, i.e., they sang songs written in the classical, though stylized, blues mode. Though she was influenced by Bessie Smith and sang blues songs, Billie Holiday was a jazz singer and must be viewed as one of the heaviest influences in modern jazz. Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday had broad appeal to the masses of black women, but Nina Simone and Esther Phillips did not. Nina Simone experimented with a broad range of material, blues being one, but appealed to or was limited to an elite set. Esther Phillips is a singer of the moment, not of the stature of Smith, Holiday, or Simone. Were it not for Dinah Washington, Little Esther would not know which note to bend. Also, no analysis of black women singers can depend solely on the songs they sang, for most had little control over their material. Lastly, no *serious* black feminist consideration of mainstream black women singers "of the past fifty years" would omit consideration of Aretha Franklin!

Lesbianism:

... women must not collude in the oppression of women who have chosen each other, that is, lesbians. (Barbara Smith, p. 51)

In the contributions of Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Gloria Hull, and Lorraine Bethel, the issues of lesbianism, homophobia, and the lesbian aesthetic are addressed. Why is it that, with the exception of comments in Beverly Smith's essay on health, the Combahee River Collective's statement, and Barbara Smith's speech on racism and women's studies, the issue of lesbianism is relegated to Section V, "Necessary Bread: Black Women's Literature"?

The fascinating and herstorical literary essays of Barbara Smith

("Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"), Lorraine Bethel ("This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition"), and Gloria Hull ("Researching Alice Dunbar-Nelson") rank as the best essays in the book, primarily because they have integrated the lesbian aesthetic into their study of black women's literature — unlike Mary Helen Washington^o and Michele Russell, the other two contributors to Section V, who do not even include one "politically correct" statement on lesbianism. Hull, Smith, and Bethel proclaim the woman-identification explicit and implicit in the works of black women writers and set forth the criteria for black feminist criticism.

Smith is the first critic to examine the works of black women writers from a lesbian-feminist perspective. In order to accomplish this, she must necessarily expand the definition of lesbianism beyond sex. Smith comes to define the lesbian sensibility in black women's literature as that in which "the central characters are female, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another" (p. 164). As she says of Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*:

... it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family. (p. 165)

Yet I do so wish that some of the present-day non-lesbian black women writers whom we so admire and write about would take the risk of incorporating a conscious lesbian aesthetic in their fiction, deal directly with sexual love between women, and take it out of the subliminal realm of imagination. I, frankly, am tired of teasing it out of their imagery.

Bethel develops a similar argument as Smith in her analysis of the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston. Bethel views lesbianism, as it is defined in the previously cited passage from Smith's essay, as the basis of black feminist criticism:

Black woman identification, the basis of Black feminism and Black feminist literary criticism, is most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels. (p. 184)

While Bethel and Smith address the lesbian aesthetic in the

^oWashington has edited two volumes of fiction by black women writers, not one lesbian story or one out lesbian writer among or in them. This is homophobia by omission.

works of non-lesbian writers, Hull writes of her discovery that writer, activist, and publisher Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "woman-identification extended to romantic liaisons with at least two of her friends" (p. 191). The process of researching Dunbar-Nelson was not only a process of rescuing her from the shadow of Paul Laurence Dunbar, her first husband, but of rescuing her from the presumption of "genteel bourgeoisie" heterosexuality. Were it not for a "Black feminist critical approach" to researching Dunbar-Nelson, the issue of her lesbianism might have been suppressed or considered a private matter. Hull establishes criteria for black feminist criticism, which closely parallel the Combahee River Collective's criteria for black feminist practice and analysis, but the closest Hull comes to calling for a conscious appreciation and acknowledgment of lesbianism is "everything about the subject is important for a total understanding and analysis of her life and work." In spite of its gentility, this essay demonstrates movingly that one's deepest intellectual commitment is emotional. Just as Hull has rescued Dunbar-Nelson from obscurity, she has resuscitated our black lesbian herstory.

The connection between black women's studies and poor and working-class women is reflected in Michele Russell's pedagogical article, "Black-Eyed Blues Connections: Teaching Black Women." The author delineates a holistic teaching strategy for black women based upon her teaching experience in a community college in Detroit. This article, in spite of its omission of the issue of lesbianism, comes closest to addressing the role of black women's studies in the lives of common black women.

But I ask the question again: Why is lesbianism relegated to the realm of literary criticism? The issue of black lesbianism should have been integrated into every single essay prepared for this collection if we are truly serious about black feminist scholarship and practice. Lesbianism is not solely an aesthetic nor solely a sexual issue, nor an issue to be treated solely by lesbians. Black lesbianism is also an issue in the social sciences. There are stereotypes and myths about black lesbians that need "dispelling." In terms of pedagogy, black women need to be taught about our lesbianism just as we are taught about our slave history or our composers, writers, poets, welders. The black church will be a regressive, oppressive institution until it not only corrects its sexism but also its homophobia. Why is there no essay in this collection which bears the word "lesbian" in its title? The bibliographic essays on influential black

women, nineteenth-century black women poets, black women novelists, black women playwrights, and black women composers are fabulous resources — with no references to black lesbians. I ask all the contributors who accept that a “feminist, pro-woman perspective is necessary to understand fully the experiences of black women” and who did not address lesbianism: How do you expect to fully understand the experiences of black women?

The issue of black women’s sexuality, except as lifestyle and aesthetic, is not treated. If one were to skip over Beverly Smith’s “Health” piece and one sentence of Erlene Stetson’s piece on slavery, one might assume that black women feminists do not believe black women have vaginas either.

How can we bring black women’s studies to women who are no longer young? Who are in prison? Who are workers? Who are not of the educated elite? It is impossible for one book to be all things to all people. Our needs as black women are immense, unexplored, barely articulated. *Brave* is a serious piece of work affirming the survival and triumph of black women in America. *Brave* is truly an act of courage and tenacity — consistent with the tradition of black women. I welcome *Brave* as part of the tradition of black women’s contribution to the life, culture, autonomy, and herstory of black women.



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Responses

February 3, 1982

Dear Adrienne,

I'm writing to express my concerns in response to your article, "Notes for a Magazine: What Does Separatism Mean?" which appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* 18.

I have two major criticisms of the article. The first is that there is no explicit statement in the article that explains why the debate over separatism is being conceived of in racial terms. No analytical rationale is provided which says why pro-separatism is characterized as white and anti-separatism as colored throughout. Even though readers may have ideas prior to reading the article about how racial identity affects one's allegiance or non-allegiance to separatism, by not stating your reasons for exploring separatism in relationship to race, you do not take responsibility for confronting the dichotomy your article sets up by implication and create a situation that is ripe for drawing racist conclusions.

My other major criticism is that definitions or theories of separatism are not differentiated from the actual practice of it. Theory and practice, words and actions are very different things. Although at the very end of the article you make this crucial and valid point: "I find myself wondering if perhaps the real question at issue is not separatism itself but how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it is practiced . . ." (p. 90), you do not clearly confront the implications of this question in the article itself. Instead you begin the article with the suggestion that the reason that separatists and non-separatists have conflicts with each other is that they simply do not have an "agreed-on meaning" of what separatism means and if they only did then it might be possible for them to "connect" and work together (p. 83). At a later point you state: ". . . the problem of definition is what these notes are about . . ." (p. 89).

The splits between separatists and non-separatists, specifically between white Lesbian separatists and women of color, have not emerged because there is not a common understanding of terms, but because of how separatism has been practiced in fact. As a non-separatist woman of color and an activist feminist and Lesbian, my criticisms of separatism have come from experiencing action or non-action, from observing how separatists actually have functioned

politically in the world. I agree that words and beliefs can influence what we do, but the words are not as significant as the practice they encourage and inspire. Many women of color, including myself, who are strong feminists have observed how a Lesbian separatist stance has led to an isolated, single-issued understanding and practice of politics, which ignores the range of oppressions that women experience. No amount of developing definitions will change what Lesbian separatism has come to mean in practice, although altered practice could very well change the connotation of the term "Lesbian separatist." Beverly Smith's and my dialogue from *This Bridge Called My Back*, which also appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* 18, and other pieces in *This Bridge* explore criticisms of the ideology and practice of separatism in detail. A recent article, "Nidishenök (sisters)" by Chrystos in *Maenad*, Winter 1982, perceptively explores the theory and practice of separatism from a Native American woman's perspective.

An example in "What Does Separatism Mean?" of theory and practice seriously diverging occurs in the section that describes Vicki Gabriner's reasons for becoming a separatist. You write:

Separatism as Gabriner uses it does *not* imply a loss of commitment to the values (justice, peace, anti-racism) which had first fired women like her into politics. What had become necessary, and what necessitated separation from the male political movements, was a restating of these issues from a woman-identified point of view, as well as a stating for the first time of issues never before perceived as political—heterosexuality, women's unpaid work in the home, child-birth, language itself. (p. 84)

Perhaps the intention of separatists originally was to keep anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-war issues at the forefront, but it is documentable that this usually did not occur. Oppression in a Lesbian separatist context began to be defined solely as Lesbian oppression, white Lesbian at that. Undoubtedly some separatists maintained their commitment to anti-racist organizing, for example, but it was most likely difficult to put this commitment into *practice* if they were operating solely in an all white women's context, when most anti-racist *organizing* was actually being done in situations which included men.

There is also the fact that many younger women who have embraced separatism have *never* been involved in the Civil Rights, Black Liberation, and anti-war movements and do not have concrete experiences in doing these kinds of political work. Their first

and only movement was the women's movement which has been functionally white. Years after the period when Gabriner "... helped to create a lesbian/feminist politics/community in Atlanta that was basically separatist and not organizationally tied to the left ..." (p. 84), Atlanta's "feminist" community remains almost entirely white and the kinds of coalitions between white women and women of color which have happened in other places have not begun to occur. This division was particularly obvious during the period of murders of Black children in Atlanta in 1980-81 when the majority of white feminists were not involved in the organizing that in many cases was being done by Black women. Of course the racial history of this region must be taken into account, but white Lesbian separatism certainly played right into the hands of a tradition of racial segregation.

The lack of an analysis of how racial identity and Lesbian separatism are and are not connected has a specifically disturbing result in the article. This is the way that a separatist position, chosen on the basis of sexual identity, and racial separation, imposed as the result of institutionalized racial segregation, are made to seem similar and to spring from the same impulses, ignoring the history and politics of this country and the element of choice.

For example, you cite the early Black women's groups that Toni Cade Bambara writes about in *The Black Woman*, published in 1970, and say: "Women of color were forming their own separate political groups early on, but these were not—to my knowledge—described as 'separatist'" (p. 84). The implication of this sentence is "But they could be considered separatist, even if no one said it." This totally negates the motivations and actual historical circumstances under which these groups were formed. It's unlikely that these women decided that their groups would exclude white women as an ideological stance. They didn't have to. Black women and white women were having very little to do with each other then, just as now. The friendship networks that no doubt made possible this organizing would naturally be Black and although some of these women might have been nationalists, i.e., racial separatists, the fact that the society itself is racially segregated must have contributed much to the composition of these groups. Such groups would also not have conceived of themselves or be labeled separatists in the Lesbian sense because they did not view themselves as a part of the women's movement and would therefore not adopt its terminology, not to mention the fact that the women in them were probably mostly heterosexual.

I want to say here that I am definitely aware that there are some women of color who now define themselves as separatists in the Lesbian separatist sense. There are also Third World women, both Lesbians and non-Lesbians, who are racial separatists and believe in only associating and working with members of their specific ethnic groups. Just as I question the limits of a Lesbian separatist stance, I also question the limitations of racial separatism, particularly when it perpetuates negative responses to difference. The real need for autonomous organizing by members of oppressed groups should in no way lead to a position that encourages bias against others or prevents principled coalitions from occurring.

Collapsing the realities of racial and sexual politics comes up again in the article when you discuss *Conditions: Five*, *The Black Women's Issue* and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* as examples of "separation" by women of color, again implying that they might indeed be thought of as separatist. You write:

This Bridge Called My Back is intended as a bridge between radical women of color—a resource for ending fragmentations of many kinds. When the projected Third World Women's Press [Kitchen Table Press] comes into being, it too will surely be a tool for forging connections, *yet by some definitions it might be described as separatist*—from the struggles of Third World men and women together, from the white-American-European feminist movement. (p. 89, my italics)

In the very next paragraph, however, you state that you are "... declining to define the projects and groupings of women of color as separatist..." as if the statement in the above paragraph had not just appeared and would have no impact on how readers would then be encouraged to think of these projects, whatever disclaimers follow.

As a co-editor of *Conditions: Five* and a contributor to *This Bridge Called My Back*, I am positive that the impulse for creating each of these works was not a separatist one, either racially or sexually. You say about *Conditions: Five*, "But it was also an act of making the art and thought of radical Black women visible to a new audience, not only feminist and not only Black" (p. 88). And it should be added, not only female. The same can be said about the audience and inclusiveness of *This Bridge*. Yes, these works were done primarily to reach Third World women, but there was also the hope that other people would learn from them too and put what they had learned into practice by actually fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression. The very effectiveness

of these two publications as tools for organizing lies in their wide distribution to diverse audiences.

Third World women's continued insistence on coalition politics is the result of knowing that we don't have the power to turn this thing around alone, and also that as long as racism, sexism, and class oppression exist *within* progressive movements as well as in the world at large, the chances for our survival are extremely limited.

The theory and practice of separatism and how these relate to racism, anti-racism, and racial identity are very complex issues well worth analyzing. Having spoken and written about this subject in the past I thought it was important to raise the criticisms and questions which your article suggested. I hope that my comments are productive both to you and to *Sinister Wisdom's* readers.

Sincerely,

Barbara Smith

Dear Editors:

I, and many of my Separatist friends, had a mixed reaction to the article "What Does Separatism Mean?" in the last issue of SW. At first I let out a sigh of relief that, unlike most articles on Separatism by Lesbians who do not define themselves as such, it was not overtly hostile, or even inaccurate.

But something about it really irritated me. The major problem I had with it was its falsely neutral tone. I have yet to meet a Lesbian who is at all political who does not have strong opinions on the subject. Certainly not the author of this article, who has been quoted elsewhere comparing Separatism to a "spiritual fad," and calling Separatists "cut off" and politically ineffective.

In any event, no one comes to a conclusion about, or an understanding of, any philosophy/strategy by lining up things that wimmin who hold that view have said on one side, and what those who do not have said on the other, and then somehow weighing each for truth-value. It would be absurd to take quotes from random communists on one hand, and random capitalists on the other, and come to some conclusion about whether communism is a worthwhile vision from that. There are marxist/leninists, anarcho-communists, socialist-feminists... each with a unique (but mistaken) analysis of oppression.

Just because the fine details of our analysis may vary slightly with each different Lesbian, and drastically across the whole movement,

doesn't mean that we're confused about what we're doing. In fact, I think it's a good sign that we're all thinking for ourselves enough to disagree. Even though there have been incredibly wrenching, painful episodes between Separatists, compared to communists, we are relatively unified!

Yes, it's true: Separatists are not perfect. But all of us are courageous, unique and creative. I honor even those Separatists I dislike and disagree with for these qualities. To say no to men and male institutions, and to give our full love and attention to Lesbians, is immensely difficult, and immeasurably rewarding.

The article feels to me like a challenge to a debate between non-Separatist Lesbian-Feminists and Lesbian Separatists. But there is a great power imbalance in this debate. The moderator, and the forum itself, is non-Separatist. The forum is open to men and straight wimmin as audience members, and therefore closed to Separatists who deny access to our writing to the enemy.

And, I'm sick of Separatists always being called on to explain and justify our position, anyway. Why are we, in most communities in the u.s., expected to compromise our Separatist principles and work on co-ed events and campaigns, by Lesbians who would never dream of compromising their humanist principles to work on Lesbian-only or wimmin-only projects?

It's time for non-Separatist Lesbians to start explaining yourselves. What does it mean to not be a Separatist in "our" movement? What is your strategy for the defeat of patriarchy over the long haul? What is the goal of your struggle? Can you honor the choice of Separatist wimmin of color not to work with men? Is it racist *not* to be a Separatist; not to withdraw your support from patriarchy, not to fight for an anti-racist Lesbian-identified culture? Is the actual practice of non-Separatist Lesbian-Feminism as dynamic and evolving as it sounds in Audre Lorde's or the author's own work, or as conformist and static as the N.O.W. Sexuality Task Force Newsletter? Where and how do "we" make the distinction between Lesbian-Feminism and namby-pamby liberal humanism?

Sidney Spinster

Dear Editors:

I am writing to you about a serious error or oversight in Joan Nestle's review of *Lesbian Poetry*. In that review she quotes two lines from my poem "Breviary,"

Do not let them kill me
before you speak to me

Both in my own collection and in *Lesbian Poetry* (and to my knowledge every place the poem has been printed) after the title of my poem, the following quotation has been inserted,

“Do not let them kill me before you speak to me
Touch me!

Behold me!”

Meridel LeSueur

from “Behold Me! Touch Me!”

In other words, those lines which Joan Nestle quoted from my poem had been originally quoted from a poem by Meridel LeSueur which I was careful in every publication to credit. I feel particularly strongly about this correction because Meridel LeSueur is a writer whose work has never received the recognition it has deserved. She is one of the most important, deep and beautiful voices in American literature. Her work records many forgotten and hidden chapters in the lives of American women, and working women and men. Moreover, she was one of the first to begin to explore a female grammar, a language outside patriarchal structure. During the McCarthy period, her work was blacklisted, and for many years, nearly disappeared. Now the Feminist Press is issuing an anthology of her work, *Ripening*. The poem whose lines I echoed in “Breviary” can be found in its entirety in a collection of Meridel LeSueur’s poetry *Rites of Ancient Ripening* published in 1975 by Vanilla Press in Minneapolis. I recommend her work to your readers.

Sincerely,

Susan Griffin

Dear Sinister Wisdom,

In her review of *The Lesbian Path* in SW 19, Bonnie Zimmerman states that two contributors are “currently Christian ministers.” Neither woman is now or ever has been a minister. Nancy Krody is an elder in her church; Sue Ebbers was a seminary student for three years. Their essays, insufficiently hostile to Christianity to please some reviewers, have been highly valued by women who write to me about *The Lesbian Path*.

Margaret Cruikshank

Announcements

Arcadian Nights: Bedtime Stories for Lesbians. Send self-addressed stamped envelope with your written lesbian-identified erotic stories, journal entries, etc. Line drawings and cartoons should be 4" x 7". Xerox copies of artwork, please — not originals. Victoria Ramstetter, P.O. Box 20216, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.

Azalea: A magazine by Third World Lesbians. Quarterly. Fiction, poetry, essays, reviews, visuals. Subscriptions: \$2 single/\$6 yearly/\$10 institutions/free to womyn in prison. Accepting work from lesbians of color only. P.O. Box 200, Cooper Sta., N.Y., N.Y. 10276.

Bloodroot: A Feminist restaurant-bookstore with a seasonal vegetarian menu. Lunches, dinners daily (Sunday brunch). 85 Ferris St., Bridgeport, CT 06605. Tel. (203) 576-9168.

C & H Publishing Services offers careful and accurate editing, copyediting, proofing, typesetting, and paste-up at reasonable rates. Founders and former editors of *Sinister Wisdom*. C & H Publishing Services, 10 Birch Road, Shelburne Falls, Mass. 01370. (413) 625-2888.

Commonwoman: A Vermont Publication of News, Culture and Dialogue from a Feminist Perspective. Published every 6 weeks. Individual subs: \$6/8 issues; \$20 for institutions. Free on request to women in prisons and mental institutions. Photos, graphics (B & W), writing (typed, double-spaced, max. 3½ pp.) welcome. Commonwoman, P.O. Box 242, Winooski, Vt. 05404.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is committed to producing and distributing the work of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes that will further Third World women's personal and political freedom. Resources needed: financial contributions (make checks out to Kitchen Table Press); materials, ideas, contacts; manuscripts (send ideas for book projects first); women of color in the N.Y. area who want to be involved in day-to-day, unromantic, undramatic labor of love. Box 592, Van Brunt Sta., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215.

Lesbian Incest Survivors: wanted to fill out questionnaire on their experience for book by Lesbian Incest Survivors. All responses confidential. For info/questionnaire, write: Susan Marie, P.O. Box 304, Oakland, CA 94668.

Oikos: Sinkholes & Seeps, A Prose-Poetry Statement of Eco-Politics, Energy and Lesbian Feminism by Pamela "Hurricane" Marshall, Moontree Press. Available through Caliente Del Sol, 224A Maynard, Santa Fe, N.M. 87501. \$5 plus tax and postage.

To the Women Who Wrote Us About Their Experiences with Violence: In 1979 we published a questionnaire in *Sinister Wisdom* and also distributed it around Portland, Oregon, asking women to send us their stories for a book on women and violence. We're still writing the book; but we have compiled an article from those amazing letters, "Survival Is an Act of Resistance," which has been published in *Fight Back: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence* (Cleis Press, 1981).

Some of you had asked to see what we did with the letters, so you've seen the piece, but didn't know it would be in *Fight Back*. Some of you have no idea whatever happened to your work or ours. And now it's been published and reviewed and you may suddenly come upon your words. For this we are sorry.

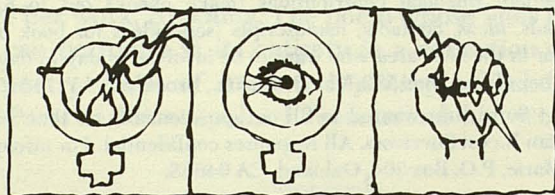
We had to leave New Mexico, where we were living, suddenly; and now find ourselves in Maine for the next several months, without our things, including your addresses. We want to send each of you at least a copy of the article. We have a few copies of the book too, maybe enough for those of you who can't afford to pay for it (it's a great book). *Please write to us and tell us your addresses.* To say thank you for your letters would be inadequate: you'll see. — Melanie Kaye, Michael Uccella, P.O. Box 247, Bowdoinham, Me. 04008.

UMOJA: support network for moms (parents) of physically/emotionally handicapped kids. I am looking for contact dykes to reply to letters of distraught parents, specifically kids of color as well as interracial kids. Send SASE to: Lou Blackdykewomon, no. J-3, Broad River Terrace Apts., Columbia, S.C. 29201. Also interested in forming 3d world dyke/feminist network for dykes of color living in the South.

Women's Writer's Center, Inc., Cazenovia, N.Y. Eighth full-year program, beginning September 1982. Full-time Resident Faculty: Olga Broumas, Rachel deVries, Jane Miller, Rita Speicher (on leave), Mona Vold. Visiting Faculty, each spending a full week on campus: Judy Grahn, Cherrie Moraga, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Sherman, Barbara Smith. c/o Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, N.Y. 13035.

Works of S. Diane Bogus: *I'm Off to See the Goddamn Wizard*, *Alright!* Black Feminist poetry, \$4; *Woman in the Moon*, \$6; *Sapphire's Sampler*, Poetry/Prose Anthology, \$7 paper, \$10 hardback. All three available for \$12 from: Wim Publications, Box 367, College Corner, Ohio 45003.

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Notes on Contributors

Donna Allegra is twenty-eight, Brooklyn-born and raised. She began writing poetry in 1976 with the Black lesbian writers' collective, Jemima, and fiction in 1980 under the influence of writers in the Black lesbian performance group, Naps. Her major writing is her journal, which began at age fourteen. She has published in *Azalea*, *The Salsa Soul Gayzette*, *Essence*, *Conditions: 5*, *Fight Back*, *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*.

Virginia de Araújo is a poet and translator of Brazilian poetry (*The Minus Sign*, *Carlos Drummond de Andrade*, Black Swan Books, 1981). She is currently a lecturer at San José State University.

Cheryl Clarke is taurus, black, lesbian, feminist, poet, critick. She studied literature at Howard and Rutgers universities, and taught the first black women's studies course to be offered at Rutgers College in 1973. Her writing appears in: *Conditions V: The Black Women's Issue* (Smith and Bethel, Eds., 1979), *Conditions VI* (1980), *Lesbian Poetry* (Bulkin and Larkin, Eds., Persephone Press, 1981), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, Eds., Persephone Press, 1981), and *Conditions VIII* (1982). She is a member of the new *Conditions* editorial collective. Born and raised in D.C., Clarke has been living and working in New Jersey since 1969.

Martha Courtot: "I am a fat woman in whom some remnant of self-love survives, in spite of all that the dominant culture and the lesbian culture have done to eliminate it. Once I was a member of Fat Chance, a performance group of fat women who danced our life truths for audiences in order to teach other women about self-love and the damage of fat oppression. Nothing would make me happier than to have this self-love break out in epidemic proportions among fat women. Then I might feel that I could finally dance again."

Chrystos: "These poems were written as gifts for friends, which I consider the finest use of my skills. I met Barbara through Gay American Indians (she is the co-founder) & Jo through the book *This Bridge Called My Back*. My thanks to both of them for the beauty their friendships give me."

Ruth Herstein, born in Brooklyn, N.Y., fell in love with the Village. Lives alone in the Village, could not recommend living alone. Member of the SAGE writing workshop. We published a book of poems and stories called *Sage Writings* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative Publications, 84 Fifth Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10011, \$2.50).

Melanie Kaye moves a lot. She lives now in Bowdoin, Maine. She is the author of *We Speak in Code: Poems and Other Writings* (Motherroot Publications, 1980), and the co-author, with Michael Uccella, of a book on women, violence, and resistance (excerpts of which appear in *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, Cleis Press, 1981).

Judith McDaniel is a fired lesbian who considers herself a "recovering academic" and a writer.

Bernice Mennis lives in the Adirondacks and teaches at Adirondack Community College.

Mary Moran is a midwestern artist and writer living in Los Angeles.

Joan Nestle is a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation. She teaches English in the SEEK Program at Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.

Melanie Perish lives in Panguitch, Utah. She has published a chapbook, *Notes of a Daughter from the Old Country*, with Motherroot Publications (214 Dewey St., Pittsburgh, Pa. 15218). *Traveling the Distance*, a collection of love poems, is available from Rising Tide Press, 258 Alphonse St., Rochester, N.Y. 14621. She reviews poetry and fiction for Motherroot Journal.

Laurie Poklop is a former teacher from the Midwest who is now studying art in Boston, living with Jane in Cambridge and hanging out with Hubrina the Ballerina.

Linda C. Powell is a Black feminist musician and actress living in New York City. *Rise and Fly*, her autobiographical exploration of the Black mother/daughter connection, will be published next year.

Sudie Rakusin is a thirty-four-year-old Jewish Lesbian painter and potter who lives in Dale City, Virginia, with her lover, Beth, and her three dogs, Amanda, Selene, and Willow.

Jean Sirius's poem in this issue is taken from her third book, *Lesbian Love Poems (an aid to the inarticulate)*. She lives in NYC with Cara, Isis, and Hecate, doing massage, reading tarot, and working on a religious tract.

Anmarie Wagstaff is a lesbian living "on the boundary" in Davis, California — making trouble, teaching, and going to graduate school.

Angela Wilson lives in New York City and is a black feminist lesbian. Her main preoccupations include the history of women in urban areas and lesbian bar culture(s).

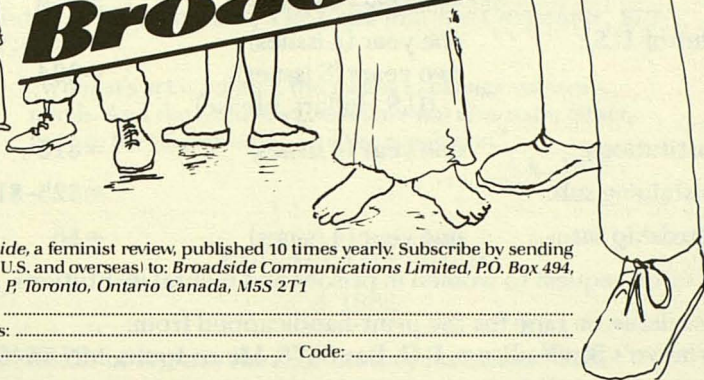
Susan Wood-Thompson is a lesbian feminist poet living in Washington, D.C. Her book *Crazy Quilt* is available from Crossing Press and, for print-handicapped readers, on cassette from Womyn's Braille Press.

zana — "on land in oregon, with a group of other wimin and children, learning to live together with all our differences, feeling out our path inch by inch when the old maps have been burned and it is up to us to create new ones."

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Sinister Wisdom records with sorrow the loss of two pioneers in lesbian and feminist writing and publishing, in the first quarter of this year:

JUNE ARNOLD

1926-1982

Co-founder (with Parke Bowman) of Daughters, Inc.; author of *Applesauce*, *The Cook and the Carpenter*, *Sister Gin*.

"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 . . . of the revolution."

-J.A., 1975

ELIZABETH FISHER

d. 1982

Founder of *Aphra*, the first literary magazine of the contemporary feminist movement; author of *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society*.

"We shall publish what we like and what we respond to, with the idea that we shall be speaking directly to women so that they can say 'There am I' and feel stronger and more doing."

-E.F., 1969

Contributors, Please Read: Please send all work for consideration and all business correspondence to: Sinister Wisdom, P.O. Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004. Please send SASE for return of work we cannot publish, and a stamped postcard if you wish your work acknowledged on arrival. Please double-space all manuscripts. Artists: please send xerox or photos of graphic work, *not* originals.

Subscribers, Please Note: If you move, please notify us as soon as possible. The post office will *not* forward your magazine. It will be returned to us, at our expense, and we will have to bill you for the additional postage and handling in remailing.

We originally announced SW 20/21 as a double issue. Due to production and economic problems we are publishing them as single issues. Number 21 will contain, among much else, poetry by Paula Gunn Allen, Lynn Crawford, Patricia Jones, Mab Segrest, Sherry Sylvester; Cherríe Moraga on *Fight Back!* and Marion Roth on *The Blatant Image*; art, theory, responses.

SW 20

3.50