

# Courage and Fierce Love

*The Complete Works of Pat Parker*

Edited by Julie R. Enszer

Dover, FL: Sinister Wisdom, Inc., 2016, 487 pp., \$22.95, paperback

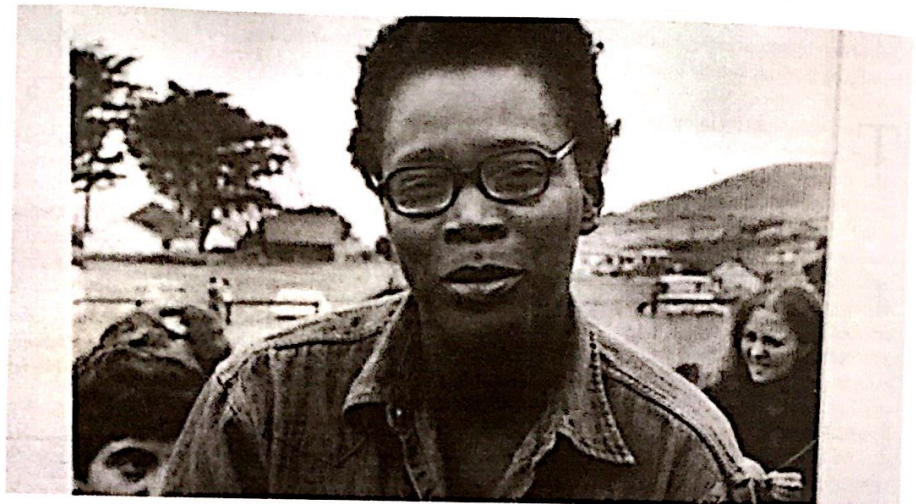
Reviewed by Kate Rushin

The cover of *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* is a black-and-white photograph by JEB (Joan E. Biren). We see Parker in performance: onstage, at the mic, working. She sports her carefully-put-together style: dark polyester shirt, vest, slacks, white tie, short-coiffed Afro, rings and watch. Pat Parker, herself. Bold in 1978, bold in 2017. You can judge this book by its cover.

This compilation includes Parker's writing from her time as a college student in Los Angeles and San Francisco in the 1960s, to her premature death, in Oakland, California, at age 45, in 1989, of breast cancer. During her lifetime, Parker published three chapbooks; two volumes of poetry; and several short-short stories, speeches, and prose pieces. Julie Enszer, in her Note from the Editor, explains that "this edition is the most complete assembly of Pat Parker's work to date." Enszer has included unpublished work from Parker's papers: several short stories, two one-act plays, and previously unpublished poetry written from the 1960s through the 1980s. Family snapshots and formal photographs add an extra dimension to the portrait of Parker. It's not all serious business; we see her laughing and smiling with family and friends, and playing with her dog. The collection communicates the range of Parker's concerns, as well as her sense of humor, playfulness, and productivity.

The significance of the collection extends far beyond that of a conventional, chronological compilation. It provides a first-hand account of an African American woman writer/activist, born in the mid-twentieth century, in segregated Texas. Parker lived a remarkable life and influenced the remarkable times and the remarkable communities in which she lived. She contributed her time, energy, and talents to a number of women's presses and publishers, founded or co-founded several organizations, and dedicated herself to women's healthcare. She also played and coached softball. Parker wrote, recorded, and performed poetry within sometimes overlapping communities—Black, working class, feminist, lesbian—and spoke out courageously in many movements for social and cultural change.

Parker wrote of violence in the Black community and in her own family and marriage in poems like "Goat/Child" and "WomanSlaughter," in which she honors and bears witness to the life of her sister, Shirley Jones, who was shot and killed by her ex-husband—who then served less than one year in prison for manslaughter. Parker was not "theorizing the black body" from some remote perspective. When she travelled to the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, held in Belgium in 1976, she spoke out against all who would brutalize and kill women. This was during a



**"The first thing you must do is forget that I'm Black. Second, you must never forget that I'm Black."** – Pat Parker

time when Black women were admonished not to criticize Black men—not to do anything that might make them any more vulnerable to the "System"—the police, the courts, and prison. Black women were expected to be silent about abuse for "the good of the community." But the community cannot thrive when any part of it is under assault. Parker wrote,

...i'm no genius,  
but i do know  
that system  
you hit me with  
is called  
a fist.

Within a predominately white, women's/gay/lesbian liberation context, Parker honored her Black woman foremothers in "Movement in Black." She challenged gender binaries, stereotyping, and hatred of queer people; challenged lesbian S&M in the context of Black feminism and the Holocaust; and faced the effects of drinking within the women's bar scene. In "don't let the fascist speak," she grappled with free speech issues. Indeed, there were few subjects that Parker did not take on in her writing, sometimes with biting irony and humor, however controversial and challenging.

And she took her poetry everywhere. She recalls standing on a piece of plywood placed on the pool table in a bar to read her work. She writes of the initial challenge of being accepted, at women's music festivals, as a poet, and subsequently going on the influential Olivia Records-sponsored tour, the Varied Voices of Black Women, which included

the musicians Mary Watkins, Linda Tillery, Vicki Randall, Gwen Avery, and others, in the late 1970s.

Parker writes—on relationships, gay parenting, roles, sex, friendship, politics, family, history, politics, and world affairs—in direct, accessible language. Taken as a whole, her works reveal not only one writer's curiosity and wide embrace but also the contours of a social and cultural history-as-lived. She chronicles the debates within an emergent and eventually flourishing West Coast lesbian community and within the second-wave feminist movement as it extended beyond the campus. Her poetry gave energy and impetus to the ideas of women's liberation, as expressed through the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements, the women's health movement, the women in print movement, the Third World Women's movement, and the Black feminist movement. These movements, in turn, cleared the way for the establishment of African American Studies, Chicano Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Gender and Transgender Studies, on US campuses.

Parker should be read in the context of two paradigm-shifting books: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). Students, scholars artists, and activists should understand that today's intersectional thinking arose from the lives of women of color and working-class women, as they analyzed their own experiences and did the courageous and sometimes lonely work of challenging themselves and others,





and speaking up for themselves, their families, and their communities. The poet Judy Grahn, Parker's friend and her collaborator in the Women's Press Collective and on the Olivia Records poetry album, "Where Would I Be Without You," writes in her introduction to this collection,

I need to say here that four, at least, of us feminist poets—Parker, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and me—who were broadly and intensively formative of ideas in the 1970s and beyond, wrote of the intersections of our lives in ways that would later inform what continues to evolve in the academy and within social movements as "intersectionality."

The point of it all is literal survival: of the body, mind, and spirit, as well as of values and traditions. From the perspective of our "post-Ellen" age of same-gender marriages and engagement announcements in the *New York Times*; at a time when the TV shows *Girls*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Transparent*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *Black-ish* win awards (giving the false impression that all is well) it would be too easy to take Pat Parker and her accomplishments for granted. She faced direct challenges to her very self wherever she went, and wherever she spoke, at a time when simply being a divorced woman made one a target of ostracism.

In the final volume of poetry published before Parker's death, *Jonestown & Other Madness* (1985), she again confronts all manner of violence, as she does from her earliest writings. She continues to raise questions of survival for Black lesbians and gay men. She addresses the 1978 mass murder of more than 900, mostly African American, men, women, and children, by the self-described religious leader Jim Jones, after he moved his People's Temple cult to a remote region of Guyana, in South America. "Black folks do not/ Black folks do not/Black folks do not commit suicide," Parker writes. She also documents the wave of largely unsolved murders of African American children and young adults who were labeled as "street children" in Atlanta, in the 1980s.

Poignantly, she begins and ends *Jonestown & Other Madness* with love poems. In the first, "love isn't," Parker expresses a longing to be with her partner on a summer beach; she imagines going on vacation. Yet, her awareness of the needs of people in her city and her pledge to address those needs require a different kind of life and relationship. She realizes,

I care for you  
I care for our world  
If I stop  
caring about one  
it would be only  
a matter of time  
before I stop  
loving  
the other.

The final poem in the collection is "legacy," for Anastasia Jean, Parker's daughter, whom she raised with her partner Marty Dunham. Anastasia was a child when Parker died of complications from breast cancer. In the "Prologue" section of the poem, Parker mocks those who imagine that lesbian parents don't or can't care for their children. Then, addressing the idea of "Anything handed down..." at the end of this section, she declares

Child  
that would be mine  
I bring you my world  
and bid it be yours.

She tells the story of her birth family for the benefit of her daughter. In Section I, "Addie and George," and Section II, "Ernest and Marie," Parker offers the narratives of her grandparents and parents. In Section III, in lines calling to mind the soaring diction of her sister-poet and correspondent Audre Lorde, Parker asserts,

It is from this past I come  
surrounded by sisters in blood  
and spirit  
it is this past  
that I bequeath  
a history of work and struggle.

What courage and fierce love emanate from the writings of Pat Parker! This anthology is a testament to her determination to write and to work for a better world—a testament to the love that Parker, her family, friends, and community created. It is also a testament to the devotion of many collaborators, editors, publishers, librarians, and scholars, notably, Cheryl Clarke, Judy Grahn, and Nancy Bereano, who contributed to the publication of this collection. And it is a testament to the determination and nearly thirty-year commitment of Marty Dunham to safeguard Parker's published and unpublished writing. Their daughter, Anastasia Dunham-Parker-Brady, has insured that Pat Parker's papers are now archived in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women at Harvard University. Editor Julie Enszer has taken up the work to pass it on, that others might be inspired to carry it forward.

At this historical moment, when the analytical lens that was crafted out of the lives and work of women and men who lacked the many advantages afforded by wealth and is tossed aside as so much academic jargon; when so-called identity politics is, in some quarters, dismissed out of hand as intellectually and morally bankrupt, and the source of our national discord; and when the Black Lives Matter movement is miscast as an organization promoting violence and "reverse racism," the work of Pat Parker cuts to the realities faced by people who are determined to create the terms of their own lives, despite the many obstacles and challenges. ♀

Kate Rushin has a BA from Oberlin College and an MFA from Brown University. She is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet and the author of *The Black Back-Ups* (1993) and has taught at the University of Massachusetts, MIT, and Wesleyan University. She has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and the Cave Canem Foundation. Her work has been published in *Callaloo*, the *Feminist Wire* ([www.thefeministwire.com/](http://www.thefeministwire.com/)), *Raising Lilly Ledbetter: Women Poets Occupy the Workspace* (2015), and *Sister Citizen* (2011).