

SINISTER WISDOM TEACHING GUIDE:

Sinister Wisdom 51: Open Issue

SUMMARY

Sinister Wisdom 51: Open Issue (Winter 1993/1994) features diverse works of prose, poetry, and visual art concerning a wide range of lesbian themes. In her “Notes for a Magazine,” editor Elana Dykewomon states that “Dykes explore identity, politics, violence, family, love, betrayal, creativity, humor. What they have in common is the willingness, the willfulness, to create their own spaces” (3). The contributors of *Sinister Wisdom 51* take on this task of “creating space” by depicting lesbians in various contexts—at home, in community meetings, in the city, in transition, at the 1993 March on Washington Rally, among others—while also carving out political and literary space through self-expression.

sinister wisdom 51



HISTORY OF SINISTER WISDOM

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal that began in 1976 and publishes three to four issues per year. The journal started in Charlotte, North Carolina with Harriett Desmoines (Ellenberger) and Catherine Nicholson as its editors. *Sinister Wisdom* is still published today, and its contents have evolved alongside lesbian identities, politics, theory, and aesthetics. Some issues are organized by a theme, while others, like *Sinister Wisdom 51*, are open issues that feature writing and art across themes.



THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

Love and Relationships

- Victoria Lena Manyarrows “When This Land Was Ours” p. 17
- Sima Rabinowitz “Between the Lines” p. 26-27
- Reggie W. Brewster “Not About the Ocean” p. 65
- Pamela Gray “This Pantoum Was Not on My Schedule” p. 66
- Laura Bean “Letter from One Hen...” p. 81
- Darmaye Marley “Experience” p. 89

Race and Cultural Identities

- Akiko Carver “Speech at March on Washington” p. 15-16
- Teresa Ortega “Soul Secrets and Bean Lore” p. 18-20
- Janet Mason “Why I hate Earth Day” p. 23

Space and Place

- Elana Dykewomon “Notes for a Magazine” p. 3-5
- Amy Concepcion and tatiana de la tierra “Weave-talk” p. 8-14
- Elliott “Lesbos Isn’t on This Map” p. 21
- Carrelin Brooks “river” p. 62-64
- Reggie W. Brewster “Not About the Ocean” p. 65
- Darmaye Marley “Experience” p. 89

Community, Activism, and Politics

- Elana Dykewomon “Notes for a Magazine” p. 3-5
- Janet Mason “In Those Days” p. 24-25
- Sima Rabinowitz “Between the Lines” p. 26-27
- Bettianne Shoney Sien “The Cold War” p. 85-88



THEMES AND CORRESPONDING READINGS

Sex/Sexuality

- Anna Livia excerpt from *Bruised Fruit* p. 40-61
- Carellin Brooks “river” p. 62-64
- Jen Benka “Symbol of Sound” p. 75

Immigration

- Amy Concepcion and tatiana de la tierra “Weave-talk” p. 8-14
- Reggie W. Brewster “Not About the Ocean” p. 65
- Kathryn Eberly “Although You’ve Gone Dancing” p. 69

Violence and Abuse

- Jeannie Witkin “The Endless Onslaught” p. 30-33
- Josi Mata “Someday” p. 34-36
- Elliott “Bir’s Song” p. 38-39
- Anna Livia excerpt from *Bruised Fruit* p. 40-61

Patriarchy and Homophobia

- Akiko Carver “Speech at March on Washington” p. 15-16
- Janet Mason “Why I hate Earth Day” p. 23

Self-Expression, Writing and Language

- Elana Dykewomon “Notes for a Magazine” p. 3-5
- Rustun Wood “Passion/Play” p. 70-73
- Jen Benka “Symbol of Sound” p. 75



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Identity: In the bilingual prose poem, “Weave-talk” (8-13), Amy Concepcion and Tatiana de la tierra collaborate to create a work of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. What are some of those experiences? How do the poets’ language choices reflect some of the themes expressed in the work? What does the alternation between prose and lyric do for the poem? What is the relationship between these writers and conceptions of “America”?

2

Sense of Place: Many of the works in this issue discuss the theme of creating a space for lesbian identities and relationships. Take a closer look at Victoria Lena Manyarrows’s “When This Land Was Ours” (17) and Elliott’s “Lesbos Isn’t on This Map” (21). What issues, images, or themes are in each piece? How does each piece present a relationship to space in the United States? In the world? How is land characterized in these poems? How does each poem’s chosen style reflect its themes? Is there a relationship between space/place and the lesbian body?

3

Relationships and Community: Some works in this issue discuss the challenges between individual romantic relationships and maintaining lesbian community. Anna Livia’s excerpt (*Bruised Fruit* 40-61) examines questions of abuse in lesbian relationships, particularly relationships where the individuals are active within lesbian-feminist community politics. How does the story trace issues of power and community in regard to abusive relationships? How does the community handle the situation, and what ethical standards are at stake? Compare the issues and themes in this story with Janet Mason’s poem, “In Those Days” (24). How does Mason’s depiction of love, relationships, and activism parallel, add to, or challenge the themes in Livia’s piece?

4

Writing and Language: Rustun Wood’s “Passion/Play” (70-73) and Jen Benka’s “Symbol of Sound” (75) experiment with the intersections of sexual identity and literary self-expression. Compare how the two works conceptualize the role of the writer. How does language help or challenge the writing process? How does sensuality relate to writing in these pieces? How can the writers’ literary experimentation—line breaks, word choices, breaking from form—reflect the content of their work?

5

Politics: Some of the work in *Sinister Wisdom 51* discusses complex and intersecting political concerns. Sima Rabinowitz’s poem, “Between the Lines” (26-27) charts a complicated relationship between a “novice” lawyer’s fight for same-sex marriage rights in the early 1990s and her personal relationship with her wife-to-be. Akiko Carver’s “Transcript of Speech at the March on Washington Rally, April, 1993” (15-16) condemns the fight to allow gay men and women to openly serve in the military, because Carver feels that the military perpetuates a racist ideology that the LGBT+ community should not support. With the knowledge that Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was repealed in 2010 and Marriage Equality was ruled nationwide in 2015, discuss how each writer approaches these ideas in the 1990s. What tone does she take? What examples or images are most convincing? Are these topics still relevant considering the changes in contemporary laws? If so, how? What is the relationship between the speaker’s personal ethics and her political agenda?



TEACHING ACTIVITIES

ARTWORK

Pick one artwork featured in *Sinister Wisdom 51*. Describe the image and answer the following: What makes the image appealing to you? What about the image fits within a journal of multicultural lesbian art and letters? What are some themes you think this artwork could be in conversation with, or complement?

SPEECH WRITING

In the style of Akiko Carver's speech at the March on Washington Rally (15-16), write your own political speech about a complex issue facing your community today.

LOVE LETTER

Read Laura Bean's humorous "Letter Written from One Hen to Another as Dictated to a Sympathetic Farm Girl" (81). How does Bean create a letter that is bizarre yet poignant in its description of relationships? In a similar style, write a love letter from the perspective of another non-human voice.

PRAISE POEM

Individually or as a group discuss Donna Allegra's praise poem, "The Women Always Wave the Flags" (97). Who is the subject of her poem? How does Allegra depict gender inequality in the workforce, and how do her last two stanzas combat it? Write your own praise poem in this style that glorifies a figure who subtly goes against socially-constructed roles.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about *Sinister Wisdom*, go to: sinisterwisdom.org

To see other *Sinister Wisdom* Teaching Guides, go to: sinisterwisdom.org/teachingguides

To request a free classroom set of *Sinister Wisdom 51*, email Julie at sinisterwisdom@gmail.com with the class title, number of students, and mailing address.



Sinister Wisdom is happy to provide, free of charge, classroom sets and reading group sets of journal issues. For people who are able to make a contribution to cover the cost of postage, we will provide an invoice; postage reimbursement is voluntary though greatly appreciated.

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